IDENTITY AND THE LIVING LANDSCAPE: ENGAGING WITH THE (BIOPHYSICAL) 'WORLD THAT IS THERE'

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, identity theory has given short shrift to the role which the biophysical character of the environment may play in shaping the emergence, elaboration and performance of individual human identities. Drawing on a number of traditions within the existing literature and recent developments in the related theories of place attachment, I offer a critique of the overly-socialized view of the landscape and advocate for a renewed attention on the biophysical environment as both a source of identity-based meanings as well as the recipient of the real-world implications for the performance of human identities. Drawing on Giddens' theory of Structuration, I propose a new conceptual model which frames this self-landscape interaction as dialectic. Building on this conceptual model, I suggest a number of pathways by which we might productively interrogate the ways in which the particularistic character of social and biophysical spaces variously constrains and enables human identity processes and, conversely, the ways in which the performance of human identities functions to effect ecological outcomes within a real 'world that is there.'

This work contributes not only to the contemporary discourse on human identity but also seeks to make the analytical potential of identity theory accessible to research traditions within the biophysical sciences. In so doing, we seek to further the interdisciplinary interrogation of social and ecological change.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Micah Levi Ingalls is a current Fellow of the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship and former Fellow of the Doris Duke Conservation Fellowship. He has received numerous awards in recognition of his academic achievement including the Wheaton College Presidential Award, The Thayer Scholarship for Environmental Science, The Clark Scholarship and the Human Needs and Global Resources (HNGR) Award. He is also a Member of the Royal Entomological Society of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Following the completion of his Interdisciplinary Bachelors of Science in Agricultural Ecology from Wheaton College, Micah spent several years working in the fields of environmental conservation, agricultural development and natural resource management in the United Kingdom, Central, South and Southeast Asia. He served as Watershed Management Specialist to the Mekong River Commission Secretariat and the United States Agency for International Development in the eastern region of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (under DAI), as well as Chief Technical Advisor to the World Wildlife Fund in the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

He is the son of nine generations of American farmers and the father of three children.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my father, who taught his sons to be men without fear or prejudice, and to my mother, who taught us to love mercy.

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Introduction

Processes of identity formation and maintenance—and the social consequences of these processes—have been an area of rich debate throughout the last century beginning with theories of symbolic interactionism in the work of George Herbert Mead in the latter part of the 19th century (Mead, 1934) but becoming most clearly articulated in contemporary times by the theories dealing with interactionism (McCall and Simmons, 1978) and structural identity theory (Stryker, 1994; and Stryker and Burke, 2000). Within these discourses, the causal mechanisms by which human identities are formed, elaborated and verified within the broader social structure have given ample room for theoretical exploration, and have sparked intense debate about the relative importance of, for example, social structure versus interior psychic processes (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Identity refers to the self-held meanings, values, worldviews and self-perceptions which comprise the human person (Burke and Stets, 2009) and they way they understand themselves and society. For my purposes here, I am primarily concerned with the behavioral manifestations of these self-held meanings and values (for it is the performance of identity through behavior that impacts upon the world around the human individual) and so I refer to Archer's (2000) definition of identity as the "constellation of commitments" which comprises the individual self. This constellation of commitments, according to identity theorists, is not self-produced but rather is the result of the individual human person's interaction with society, and the numerous negotiations by which identity meanings are 'hammered out'. This relationship between the individual and society has been critical in the development of identity theory. Giddens (1984) concept of Structuration has been primarily influential, describing the relationship between structure (society) and agency (the individual person, or collectivities of persons) as a dialectical process whereby the agent selects attributes from society, embodies these attributes,

critiques them and reacts against structure either to reproduce it, or to modify it. Through this interactional relationship between Structure and Agent, according to Structuration, it is said that the individual and society are mutually constituted.

The transactional relationship between structure and agent, and between individual agents and one another, is understood to occur through symbolic exchanges in which normative behaviors, discourse and symbols are given social value (while any behavior may be said to support a range of possible symbolic meanings, these meanings are established through social processes of negotiation). In this way, the performance of identity through symbolically meaningful behaviors allows the individual to verify his or her identity through positive interactions with others (Blumer, 1969) and, in so doing, to build social capital (Bourdieu, 1998; Burton *et al.* 2008; Burke and Stets, 2009). What is of critical importance for our purposes here is that the bulk of identity theory posits that identity categories and meanings are worked out within the social sphere (through symbolic transactions) and that these identity categories and meanings are verified through the performance of particular behaviors which are considered normative for those sets of self-held meanings.

To whatever degree identity theorists have differed in their relative emphases on social structure versus agency, or the mechanisms by which meanings are socially constructed and how these constructions function in identity processes, there is general agreement within the corpus of the existing literature that the primary, perhaps exclusive, modes of exchange are situated within the realm of *social* interaction. Whether, and to what degree, the biophysical setting of human action in general—and the character of specific landscapes in particular—are operative in the identity processes has remained under explored. While Burke and Stets (2009) acknowledge that biophysical elements provide resources and physical settings for the functioning of systems of interaction, they uncritically lump these elements under the rubric of social structure, implying that biophysical and social elements are functionally

indistinguishable in identity processes. While it is true that the ordering of biophysical resources reflects, and supports, various systems of social interaction in a number of ways (Massey, 1993), neglecting to differentiate between the social and biophysical components of structure (and the various processes that each is subject to) has hindered the interrogation of their differential influences on, and responses to, human identity formation and verification. Furthermore, casting biophysical landscape elements in overly-socialized terms has kept identity theory largely isolated from parallel discussions on the human dimensions of ecological change, furthering the historic rift between the social and biophysical sciences (Freudenburg *et al.* 1995).

We ask then what, if any, are the functional differences between the social and biophysical elements of structure in terms of the role they play in shaping human identity? Of what relevance are these differences for understanding identity formation and performance in particular places?

First, I want to suggest that the character of particular landscapes may play an important role in the shaping the emergence of particular identities by setting parameters around the sorts of human meanings which can be supported. Second, I suggest that the performance of human identities through normative behaviors have not only symbolic, but also real-world consequences for the biophysical as well as social elements of structure. Finally, I will propose a possible conceptual model for understanding the relationship between human identity processes and the biophysical and social landscape which frames these two as dialectically related in a process of mutual elaboration. While I follow Gidden's (1984) Structuration framework for conceptualizing the relationship between (social) structure and individual human agency and identity, I propose a distinction between the social and biophysical elements of structure. This conceptual distinction is important because it has analytical and practical implications. While contemporary identity theory has explored the social effects of identity

performance, the ecological impacts of identity processes are seldom addressed because our existing models do not adequately allow for this distinction between social and biophysical elements.

In the first section, we will seek first to conceptualize some of the ways in which the biophysical elements of the environment are operative in the emergence of human identities, and suggest two causal pathways by which these influences are operative in identity processes. In the second section, we will engage with the inverse of this relationship, exploring some of the ways by which the performance of human identity is effectual in shaping the biophysical elements of the landscape and related ecological processes. In the final section, we will bring together these two directional relationships in order to frame the Self-Landscape dialectic.

The Landscape and the Emergence of Human Identity

In order to conceptualize a way in which the totality of the environment—the biophysical as well as social elements of the landscape—may be operative in processes of human identity, we must resituate the social person (the primary interest of contemporary identity theory) within a broader conceptualization of the human person as both a social *and corporeal* being. Identity processes are negotiated by the embodied individual who operates within a real world 'that is there' (Mead, 1934) which has both biophysical and social dimensions, each of which are potent forces shaping the emergence of human identities, but which act upon the human person in different ways (see Archer, 2000, for a fine critique of overly- socialized notions of the human Self). The human person's primary system of interaction (speaking, at least, in chronological terms) is with the forms and forces of the material world, and not the abstract world of ideas and symbolism which constitute the basis of

discursive interaction in society. Several studies in early child psychology have indicated that the physical environment of the pre-verbal (non-discursive) child form the psychological basis by which the child distinguishes the Self from Other (Piaget, 1954; Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). This strongly suggests that it is this direct, embodied interaction, and not discursive interaction in society, which is the primary pathway by which the individual distinguishes Self from Other (what Weigert, 1991, refers to as the Generalized Environmental Other). Archer (2000) reminds us that this primary mode of interaction carries on through life, and that it is the Self's agential expression through embodied practice in the material world, through the day-to-day activities of life, which gives structure and meaning to human existence and identity.

That the human individual learns to distinguish the Self through interaction with their biophysical environment and the corporeal elements of other social actors (i.e., gender, age, etc.), however, provides only a partial step toward supporting the contention that the *character* of that environment—its constellation of attributes and forces—plays an active role in shaping individual human identity by variously supporting and constraining the range of meanings and activities which are necessary for its formation, elaboration and verification.

The landscape is much more than a setting for human action; it is a potent force in shaping the emergence of human identities within it. The impacts of the biophysical environment which are effectual in shaping human identities are felt both as biophysical prompts as well as those higher-order landscape meanings which are shaped through the lens of social construction and its normative demands. These two pathways by which biophysical elements of the landscape are formative in the development and maintenance of human identities, I suggest, each depend (though in different ways) upon the particularistic character of those environmental elements.

The first of these pathways deals largely with physical interaction between the human as biological organism and the environment from which the human person derives its livelihood. The biophysical character of the landscape circumscribes possible modes of engagement by allowing and disallowing particular human behaviors. At the most basic level, it may be said, the material world acts upon the individual through physical prompts and sensory cues, such as gravity, inertia, edibility and so on (Archer, 2000) perceptual constraints (Tuan, 1974; Cheng *et al.* 2003) and, possibly, psychological cues such as those posited by Biophilia theory (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). These biophysical cues which impinge on the human person form a structure which favors certain forms of engagement, whilst constraining others and, in so doing, shape the nature of humanity's practical endeavors to procure food, shelter, and the other first order necessities of the human person. This day to day engagement with the material world has, for most of human history, occupied the majority of humanity's time and attention and plays an important role in shaping those self-definitions which are salient in the formation of identity. The types and fertility of soils, precipitation and hydrologic regimes, geographical features of slope and aspect, mean temperature and seasonal variation all play a role in shaping the biotic features of the landscape, and set the parameters within which particular human activities are more or less tenable (Archer, 2000) and these activities, further, through the interaction between biophysical constraints and enablements and the mores of social structure attain the status of morphological facts (Durkheim, 1982), with peculiar power to impinge upon the suite of identity meanings available to the individual. An arid region fosters (but does not determine) the emergence of semi-nomadic pastoralism, for example, more readily than settled commercial agriculture. In playing a role in shaping emergence of nomadic pastoralism, it also supports the emergence of identity categories relatively more consistent with nomadic pastoralism. Gray's (1998) Scottish hill-country, with its shallow soils and cold climate, as he observes, could only give rise to a limited set of breeds and crops, and shaped the emergence of the Scottish sheep farmers who define themselves in particular ways. The presence or absence of lakeside

environmental features allow particular forms of recreational engagement and thus what sorts of recreational-based meanings can be important to residents (Stedman, 2003).

These physical constraints on human behaviors provide perhaps a primary pathway by which the biophysical landscape begins to actively shape what sorts of self-held meanings are feasible within particular environments (Sack, 1997; Archer, 2000). While this primary pathway might be said to represent the most direct relationship between the individual and their biophysical environment, we must always bear in mind that the social and biophysical elements are inextricable, continually interpenetrating (Freudenburg *et al*. 1995). The attributes of the physical environment which impinge on directly on the human person are themselves mediated through social structure in important ways. The environmental constrains on agricultural production, for example—influencing what sorts of agriculture, and thus what sorts of farmers are possible within particular landscapes—are also shaped by available technologies, transportation networks, and market forces (Hedrick, 1966).

A second possible pathway by which the biophysical elements of landscape play a role in the formation of human identities is through the way in which the environment shapes the social construction of landscape meanings, and the normative implications of those meanings (Tuan, 1974; Sack, 1997; Stokowski, 2002; Stedman, 2003). While biophysical prompts are certainly most accessible to the individual through sensory perception and inhabitation in the material world, they accumulate at higher social levels to produce emergent social responses to environmental conditions. Society's collective engagement within, and between, particular environments interact with other social forces to code meanings onto the physical landscape and, so we say, to socially construct them. Greider and Garkovich (1994:1) nicely articulate the significance of this attribution of symbolic meaning which provides a lens through which the individual views the meanings and significance of their landscape. They write, "[t]he real estate developer, the farmer, the hunter are definitions of who people are, and the natural

environment—the physical entity of the open field—is transformed symbolically to reflect these self-definitions." What is especially significant about the social construction of the landscape is not only that it shapes perception but also that it represents, in a very real way, a system of encoded norms for those who inhabit those landscapes (Massey, 1994; Sack, 1997). "This is farm country" is then not only a descriptive statement characterizing the landscape and the identity of people within the landscape, but also a prescriptive statement regarding what sort of activities, identities and behaviors are 'in-place' (versus 'out of place', Sack, 1997). These 'rule-embedded landscapes' play a direct role then in shaping the identity of persons within them by variously proscribing and prescribing particular behaviors and by socially constraining the suite of possible identities available to individuals within those landscapes.

These two pathways are continually interpenetrating. While the attributes of a particular environment may foster a selected range of human behaviors (the first pathway), this range of behaviors and identities which are available to the individual is also shaped by the rules which society attributes to that environment, and the determination of appropriate (in-place) behaviors.

While Greider and Garkovich's conceptualization of the social construction of landscape allows us to understand how society attributes meaning and so shapes perception, they run the risk of over-socializing the biophysical landscape itself. They write, "of course humans reside in a natural 'world that is there,' but this world is meaningless," (1994:2) but do not allow for the possibility that this 'natural world' plays a role in shaping the meanings which are brought to it. They write, further, "the open field is the same physical thing, but it carries multiple symbolic meanings that emanate from the values by which people define themselves" (1994:1). I suggest, however, that it makes a great deal of difference that the open field *is* an open field and not a forest and, further, that it is very likely some sort of field. Where the theoretical tradition has presented us with an overly-socialized framing of these constructions, it has led us away from the possibility of recognizing—and thus analytically engaging

with—the very real biophysical elements which parameterize those constructed meanings. Indeed, it may be said, that the social constructivists have been unable to see the forest for the construction of their trees.

A possible alternative framing of the social construction of landscape meanings, and one which I employ here to resituate social construction within real biophysical spaces, has been put forward by Stedman (2003) in his work amongst lakeside residents in rural Wisconsin. In this study, he noted that the specific character of lakeside environments—the clarity of the water, the number of homes on the shoreline, and other elements—played a role in what sorts of activities were possible within those areas, and thus what sorts of meanings those environments could hold for residents. Thus, while the attribution of meaning to landscape is clearly a social event, it is one in which society is not entirely free because those attributed meanings must be constructed in reference to the content of that particular landscape, the character of which allows only a limited set of possible meanings and, moreover, more readily lends itself to some meanings within that range than to others.

Let us consider a couple of examples from the literature which might illustrate the ways in which the landscape shapes human identities:

Modes of agricultural production in the United States have changed considerably since the late 19th Century, due to technological advances in productive practices and transportation networks, national agricultural policies and the opening of large areas of the American Midwest (Lyson and Green, 1999; Lobao and Meyer, 2001). These agricultural changes, which have resulted in increasingly large farm parcels utilizing a limited number of cultivars, have played an important role in shaping what it means to be an American farmer (Albrecht and Murdock, 1984). The central importance of producing commodities for largely non-local markets, and the economies-of-scale advantages afforded to conglomerate farms have resulted in increasingly large operations managed by an ever-decreasing

number of individuals. These structural changes have fostered the emergence of productivist farmer identity types, whose self-held conceptions of what it means to be a farmer emphasize commodity production (especially emphasizing staple food products) and economic efficiency (Fitchen, 1991; Albrecht, 1997; Burton and Wilson, 2006; Burton et al. 2008)

While these agricultural changes are clearly social phenomena, their patterning across the landscape has also been shaped by biophysical parameters including topography (in the American agricultural experience, the flat, relatively unvaried, deep top-soiled plains of the Midwest have allowed for parcel-conglomeration and the mechanization of grain and soy production which could not have occurred elsewhere to nearly the same degree (Lobao and Meyer, 2001), low settlement densities (providing cheap, uninterrupted agricultural lands), climates suitable to the production of particular crops, and soils. The shallow soils of Northeastern United States, for instance, have played an important role in limiting their market-share of grain and commodity production, but have fostered the emergence of small-scale family dairy (Hedrick, 1966). The formation of farmer identity types within these contexts, while emergent within particular social structures, were also shaped by the influences of their biophysical landscape. The Northwoods area of Wisconsin, once heavily forested, was cleared during the late 19th century, leaving behind poor soils and few livelihood alternatives. The government of Wisconsin actively promoted agriculture in that area to support development and local economy. These efforts ultimately proved unsuccessful, according to Williams and Van Patten (2006), largely because of the poor soils which would not support agricultural land uses. The failure of agriculture to establish in this area allowed for the reforestation of the landscape and, by consequence, the growth of a substantial tourism sector for people seeking escape and natural environments. These forested landscapes, rather than their agricultural alternative (which could not be supported by the landscape's biophysical constraints) now plays an important role in defining the character of the area and supporting

the identity of its residents, bringing us to our second example (below), that of second and seasonal home development.

Recent decades has seen the proliferation of second homes and other residential developments within high-amenity 'natural' areas in many developed countries, such as in the Northwoods areas on the central United States. Increasingly interconnected and technology-driven home and work environments, and the pressing demands of society have, in this late modern period, brought about a surge in reflexivity on the part of many people for whom modernity's technological interconnectedness has, nevertheless, fostered a sense of existential placelessness (McIntyre, 2006) which seems to erode their own opportunity for choice and for the free expression of identity (Giddens, 1991; Stedman, 2006). Such sensibilities, characteristic of reflexive modernity (Beck *et al.* 1994) have been a contributing factor the rise of second home development as people seek to resituate themselves in particular places (Stedman, 2006; Williams and Van Patten, 2006), intentionally removed from the demands which often characterize their primary residence (McIntyre *et al.* 2006).

Amenity-rich areas, which offer mountains, lakeshores, coastlines and forests are commonly chosen for the siting of second homes (McIntyre, 2006). Remoteness from modern society, a sense of being in-nature, and ideals of simplicity and "pause in a world of movement" (McIntyre *et al.* 2006) figure prominently as motivations for second home development in these landscapes. By removing themselves from the demands of modern life—in which many people emphasize their inability to express self-held meanings which they consider core to their identity—and resituating themselves in these 'natural places,' they are given greater freedom and scope for the elaboration and expression of these core-values (Stedman, 2006; Williams and Van Patten, 2006). What is important for our purposes here is the observation that the self-held meanings and identities are created and reinforced in these landscapes because of the biophysical character of amenity-rich areas. While the constructed meanings of these

places are clearly social, those meanings can only be supported by particular biophysical elements in the landscape.

These pathways, then, represent two possible ways in which the biophysical parameters of the landscape are effectual in shaping human identities: while the biophysical prompts of the landscape, felt first at the level of individual and their engagement in the landscape, shape what sorts of behaviors are possible in those contexts, the social construction of those landscapes determines what sorts of behaviors are appropriate, or expected, in those places and function to support a particular range of identities. By shaping particular behaviors, and allowing for the attribution of particular social meaning to those behaviors, these processes play a role in directing the formation of the values and self-held meanings of the individuals in those landscapes.

Biophysical Impacts from the Performance of Human Identity

In this section we will seek to engage more directly with the vital implications of identity meanings and the normative dimensions of landscape-based symbolic expression on the biophysical world that is there.

Any human activity which entails practical engagement with the biophysical world will inevitably effect change on that world. While this direct causal relationship between human activities and the elements and processes of the biophysical world is fairly self-apparent, what has been less obvious—or rather, what has been obfuscated in identity discourse because of a systematic privileging of social interaction over other forms of exchange—is a clearer understanding of how processes of identity formation and maintenance impact these biophysical elements and processes.

Critical to our understanding of the real-world impacts of human identities is the relationship between these self-held meanings and their performance through normative sets of behaviors (Stryker, 1994; Burke and Stets, 2009). Contemporary identity theory has spent a fair bit of time elaborating the relationship between identity and identity performance through behaviors (see, for example, Burke and Stets, 2009 for a fairly thoroughgoing discussion). These discussions, as we have noted, have addressed the issue of identity performance largely within the context of social interaction by which the individual learns, performs and verifies their identity.

Human behaviors are emergent from cognitively-held commitments and values which comprise human identities. Categories of farmer, wife, husband, doctor, patriot, etc., all carry with them sets of normative behaviors. The performance of these normative behaviors is the social mechanism by which the individual demonstrates their identity, not only as a teacher, for example, but as a *good* teacher. In this way, the performance of these identity-based behaviors takes on a symbolic dimension, and the performance of identity through symbolic exchanges comprises the basis of interactional identity theory (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1994). While there is clearly a symbolic dimension to much of human behaviors which emerge from identity, what is critical for our purposes here is to recognize that these behaviors are not *only* symbolic, they are also practical actions in a world of real material objects (Archer, 2000).

To return to the example of the agricultural productivist, whose primary categories of commitments prioritize the maximal production of agricultural commodities (versus, say, placing a primary value on the non-productive aspects of farm land, such as habitat management), the performance of this identity will entail particular modes of agricultural production which are aimed to maximize productivity and economic efficiency and thus the verification of productivist agricultural identity to themselves and to others who share similar understandings, and hold similar self-definitions of what it means to be a farmer (Burton *et al.* 2008; Goldschmidt, 1978). Agricultural behaviors consistent with productivist

farmer identities might include large-scale monocultures, intensive nutrient management through inorganic fertilizers, chemical-based pest management regimes, the cultivation of all available lands within the farm, etc. Because these behaviors are considered normative for productivist farmers (in order to maximize agricultural productivity), they also have an important symbolic dimension. A 'good farmer,' who defines himself in terms of this criterion, demonstrates this through his technical ability to perform these tasks even when economic structures might strongly incentivize alternative behaviors (Burton and Wilson, 2006; Burton *et al.* 2008).

The ecological impacts of agricultural behaviors which are consistent with productivist farmer identities have been well-documented, including impacts on faunal biodiversity, nutrient cycling and hydrological processes (Tillman, 1997; Matson *et al.* 1997; and Altieri, 1999). Unwillingness to participate in conservation programs which entail the setting-aside of productive agricultural land presents an obstacle to conservation efforts within agricultural landscapes in which productivist farmer identities predominate. The decline in the diversity of agricultural species and cultivars (with an increasing emphasis on the limited set which are most productive within these management regimes), and the rise of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) are reinforced by this primary valuation of productive efficiency to the exclusion of other concerns.

Alternative farmer identities, such as those which characterize neo-agrarian movements which emphasize other non-productive values of agriculture, such as conservation of on-farm biodiversity, entail different sets of normative expectations regarding which behaviors are appropriate. Generally, these behaviors produce different ecological impacts than do the behaviors which characterize productivist agricultural identities, including positive impacts on biodiversity (Matson *et al.* 1997; Altieri, 1999; Schmitzberger *et al* 2005; Bengtsson *et al.* 2005).

While the relationship between identity performance and the biophysical impacts of that performance may be more apparent in the case of natural resource based occupational identities (as in the agricultural examples above), the performance of non-productive identities also impact directly on the biophysical elements of the landscape. In our example given earlier—that of second home and residential development within high amenity areas—we observed that people locate to particular areas (whether seasonally or permanently) which they perceive as being able to support their own self-definitions. These movements themselves—purposive relocation to landscapes which support these core-values of identity—represent one aspect of the performance of these identities and directly impact on the biophysical elements of these landscapes, affecting ecosystem processes in numerous ways (Stynes *et al*. 1997; Hall and Muller, 2004). The parcelization of forested landscapes for seasonal home developments is an important contributing factor to forest fragmentation and loss of connectivity which impacts on ecosystem structure and the mobility of species (Gobster and Schmidt, 2000). Second home-owners in high amenity areas have demonstrated a marked preference for waterside properties (Coppock, 1997) which have had a substantial impact on water quality indicators, including sedimentation of streams (and resulting turbidity), eutrophication of water bodies, and alterations in stream hydrology (Gartner, 1987).

Not only does the establishment of residences in these areas effect biophysical and ecological changes, but also the management of land, lawns and gardens on these properties—also the behavioral outworkings of identity and values—plays a role in shaping the biophysical landscape. Dwyer and Childs' (2004) analysis of second-home property management in the North Woods region of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota observed that many people seek to recreate landscape associations from their primary residences by establishing short-mowed lawns, and the plantation of non-native species. These behaviors reflect not only aesthetic ideals and sensibilities, but also play a socially-symbolic role in

communicating the identity of the landowner to others (see Robbins and Birkenholtz, 2003, for example, which deals with the symbolic significance and ecological implications of lawns in American society).

While the negative ecological consequences of these identity-based behaviors (both the siting of second homes in high-amenity areas and the management of these properties) are potentially substantial in these landscapes, there are a number of positive impacts which result as well. Dwyer and Childs' research found that while second-home and seasonal owners, whose movement to these 'natural' landscapes allowed greater scope for their identity, were more likely to choose waterside locations and to have a potentially larger negative impact across a variety of environmental indicators, they were also more likely than permanent residents to support land-use regulations which restricted further developments.

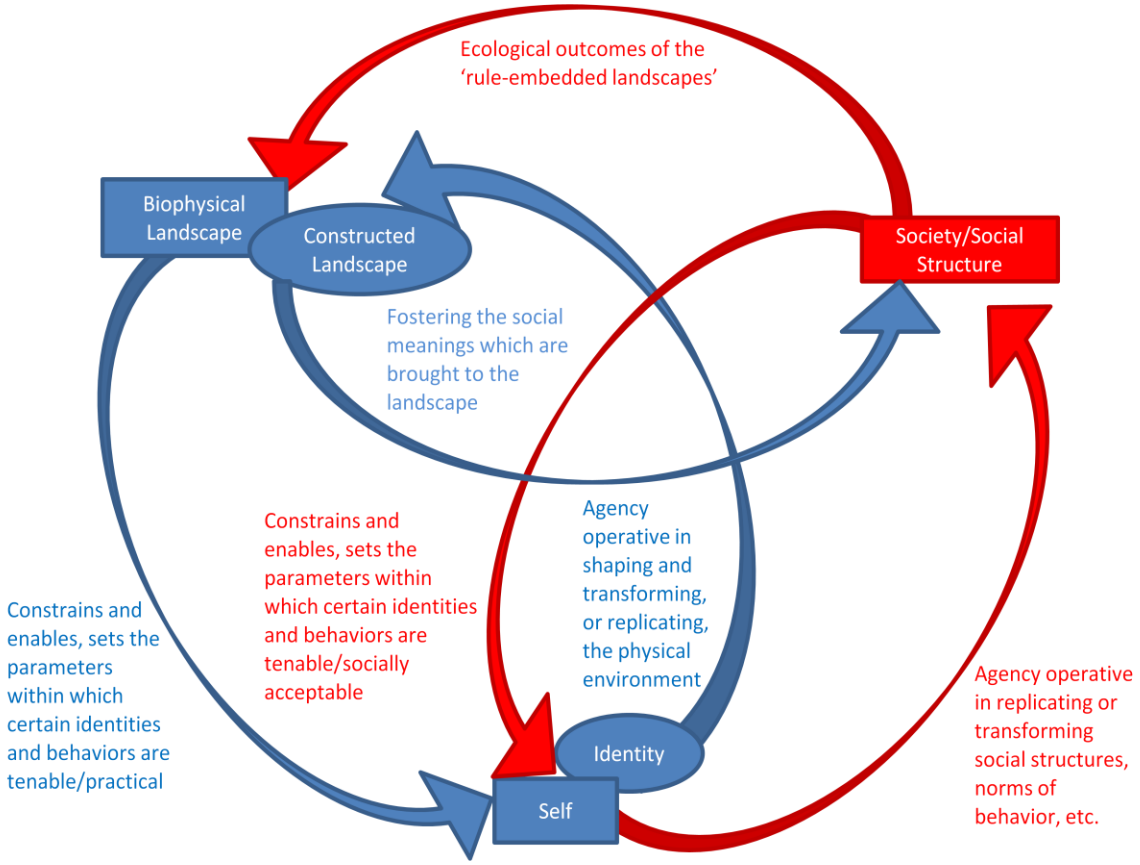
The Self-Landscape Dialectic

In this section, we recapitulate the foregoing discussion, and frame both parts of these identity process in the biophysical landscape as situated within a dialectical relationship by which the biophysical elements of the landscape, being formative in the development of human identity, are themselves shaped by the performance of those identities. This process (figure 1) is best conceived of as a dialectic process of mutual elaboration between the physical space and human identity.

The Structure-Agency formulation is useful here for suggesting a possible conceptual understanding of the relationship between individual and social Agency and the structure of the biophysical realm. Just as character of social Structure has a tendency to constrain and enable certain identities, and to elaborate

and be elaborated by these identities in a dialectical fashion, so too the character of the biophysical landscape constrains and enables these identities and is mutually elaborative with them.

Figure 1: Landscape-Self Dialectic



By patterning our understanding of this dialectical relationship in much the same way that Giddens and others (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992) have conceptualized the relationship between identity and social structure, we open a role for elements of the biophysical landscape while avoiding the mistake of attributing to it deterministic powers. Invoking the language of Structuration, we describe the biophysical elements of the landscape *shaping*, *influencing*, *constraining* and *enabling*, but not *determining*, for the powers of human agency can work against these biophysical constraints of the landscape.

This simplified model is certainly more complex in reality, complicated not only by the diversity of self-held, even potentially contradictory meanings, which may exist simultaneously within the individual, but also the diversity of identity-based meanings amongst actors in society. The model allows us not only to frame our investigation of the emergence of particular identities in place and the possible ecological outcomes of identity-based behaviors, but also to conceptualize the way in which the relationship between social and ecological change is mediated through identity processes.

Framing this relationship as an iterative, dialectical process provides a critical *point d'entrée* for interrogating the relationship between social and ecological change, not only in cases where landscape change is purposively driven by the performance of human identities which shapes the landscape toward the idealized forms which support those identity own meanings, but also where unintended change results.

Because particular features of the landscape are needed to support the identity of individuals within them, people seek to retain these features on the landscape and to drive landscape change toward their idealized forms. This is done both through the active, purposeful engagement of individuals and collectivities of individuals in the physical transformation of their landscape (through, for example, tree-planting initiatives, agricultural cultivation, forest management, urban gardening, etc) and through the establishment of zoning, land use laws, and other social structures which govern behaviors.

Socially constructed meanings provide both an interpretive lens through which residents view the biophysical landscape, and also establish a trajectory of landscape management. The social construction of landscape is, indirectly, a biophysically transformative act, for it shapes future behaviors on the landscape which influence the directionality of landscape change. Dwyer and Childs' (2004) observation that second home owners tended to favor tighter restrictions on future developments in these areas is

an expression of this, by which residents who have moved to particular landscapes seek to retain those characteristics.

While the performance of human identities may directly and intentionally effect ecological changes (where humans shape the biophysical landscape toward one which more readily supports their own meanings), unintended ecological changes also result with both "positive" (consistent with identity-based meanings) and 'negative' outcomes (those which are inconsistent with self-held meanings). Part of the reason that the performance of human identities can result in biophysical and ecological impacts which are apparently inconsistent with the values and commitments of these identities, stems from the difference between the operation of social and biophysical processes. The biophysical elements of the landscape do not share the symbolic language which constitutes many human actions and thus behaviors which are intended to symbolically communicate human meanings may not, in fact, achieve biophysical results inconsistent with those identity categories (Weigert, 1991). The "amenity migration" (McIntyre, 2006) provides a case in point. A high degree of natural elements on the landscape and a general lack of residential development were important attributes which allowed the landscape to support the identity-based meanings of second home owners. But the movement of people into these amenity-rich areas, beyond a certain threshold, begins to remove—or dramatically alter—those desired elements. Further developments would alter the character of that landscape away from its 'natural' condition and render it less able to support residents' meanings, while fostering the conditions consistent with the emergence of a new constellation of meanings (Stedman 2003; 2008). Cases in which unintended outcomes result, highlights the functional autonomy of the social and biophysical elements of the landscape.

The shaping of the biophysical landscape in ways which supports the meanings of residents within those landscapes is further complicated not only by the multiplicity of meanings and identities which are

emergent within any one space (Massey, 1994; Greider and Garkovich, 1994), and the contestation of meaning which may result (Cheng *et al.* 2003; Dwyer and Childs, 2004), but also by exogenous drivers of landscape change. Landscapes which are transitioning away from traditionally-dominant agricultural land uses represent a case in point. The processes of agricultural restructuring, while occurring at national and international levels, have effected substantial changes in many local communities through rapid rates of farm closure and the release of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses (Lyson *et al.* 1999). These exogenous changes have had a profound impact on shaping these local spaces and, in so doing, have challenged the self-identity of rural communities by removing many landscape-based referents of historical farmer identity (Fitchen, 1991). While any physical and social spaces is continually subject to forces of change and revision, it may be that these (post-)agricultural landscape transitions, because of the extent and pace of change, may prove particularly unsettling.

Conclusion

We have sought here to suggest a way in which to re-engage with the biophysical landscape in terms of the formation and verification of human identity, and thus the analytical potential of bringing identity theory to bear in the question of ecological change. Human identities have normative dimensions which mandate action in the material world with consequences which, though certainly symbolic and social, extend far beyond the social realm both by effecting change across the landscape as well as conserving landscape forms and uses which are referent of identities in real places. Not only are human identities potentially efficacious in the conservation and transformation of landscape, but the biophysical environment is living and active, constraining and enabling the suite of self-held identities which are possible, or even desirable, within certain bounds. This conceptualization of the relationship between

the physical landscape and human identities provides a possible counterpoint to an overly socialized view of nature and allows us to resituate our discussions of human identities within specific social and ecological contexts.

Because my project here is to conceive of a more elevated role of the biophysical elements of the landscape in our understanding of human identity processes—rather to proffer a fully self-sufficient conceptualization of human identity formation—my discussion may seem to minimize the substantial contribution of social influences and processes in identity formation and maintenance. This is self-consciously done in order to delimit our task to a discrete question, namely, that of the relationship between the biophysical elements of the landscape and the processes of human identity formation and maintenance and should not be understood as a minimizing of those elements in reality.

Further empirical research is needed to interrogate the causal relationships between specific identities and the particularistic character of the landscapes in which these identities are emergent, as well as the range of ecological outcomes which result from the performance of those identities. While the relatively more overt relationship between natural resource-based occupational identities (such as loggers, fishermen, farmers, etc.) and the ecological impacts which arise from their role performance in particular places may provide a set of readily accessible cases by which this model can be tested, and possible causal pathways of social-ecological change can be elaborated, it should be noted that this process may be equally operative in landscapes which do not present obvious characteristics either of the non-human biotic environment (some urban areas, perhaps) or of human elements (such as some wilderness areas).

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Why the Hyphen Matters: Diversity in Farmer Identity across a Transitional Landscape

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A Thesis: Submitted as Two Papers

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Masters of Science

By

Micah Levi Ingalls

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ABSTRACT

The restructuring of the agricultural economy in advanced nations has, in recent decades, brought about substantial biophysical and social changes in many rural landscapes including farm closure and consolidation, and the release of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses. These landscape transitions are important along several dimensions, affecting food security, rural well-being and the production of ecosystem services. Current social research into these landscape changes has focused largely on the structural drivers and consequences of change in terms of government policy, agricultural economics and rural demography, while the self-held meanings, commitments and decisions of individual farmers within specific social and ecological spaces within these landscapes has been underexplored. Through in-depth interviews with farmers in transitional landscapes of New York State, my research seeks to contribute to our understanding of individual-level processes of farmer identity formation, change and verification within these areas, and explores some of the social and biophysical implications of these processes and the meanings which farmers ascribe to them. Within these landscapes, neo-agrarian identities, the core values of which often include organic or low-chemical production, direct marketing, an emphasis on social-embeddedness and ecological and other non-productive values, maintain a high visual and symbolic presence on the landscape, challenging many productivist assumptions. Localism and small-farmer identities are commonly shared across farm operation types and often juxtaposed against the idea of conglomerate-farm operators, as representative of non-local farmer types. The implications of these changes in farmer identity include changing evaluative relationships and social networks, agricultural practices, and commitments to place.

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Introduction

The restructuring of the agricultural economy in advanced nations, including changes in national and international policies relating to the subsidization of agriculture and increasingly globalized agricultural markets, has had a significant impact on the social and biophysical landscapes which have historically been dominated by agriculture-based livelihoods (Lyson *et al*. 1999; Olson, 1999; Lobao and Meyer, 2001). The impacts of these changes include the closure of many small and medium size farms, the release of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses, increases in average farm size, increasing intensification of agricultural production, and significant social changes in rural communities.

Such landscape transitions within areas historically dominated by agriculture have become a concern not only for community planners and state and federal government (Dwyer and Childs, 2004; Hall and Muller, 2004) but also for many researchers within the social and physical sciences (Hiemstra and Bushwick, 1989; Agarwal *et al.* 2002; Brown *et al.* 2005). The uncertain effects of these transitions on the social and ecological components of the landscape has raised significant questions about the fate of, for example, agricultural sustainability (Lobao and Meyer, 2001), biodiversity (Lorimer and White, 2003), rural society (Buijs *et al.* 2006) and changes in land use and land cover (Nagendra *et al.* 2004; Ruiz and Domon, 2009). Beginning in the early 1970s, alarming estimations of the pace and extent of farmland conversion have focused attention largely on the expansion of urban development into exurban agricultural landscapes (deHaven-Smith *et al.* 1989). In New York State, for instance, where the present study is focused, the Hudson River corridor extending from New York City to Albany was predicted to experience particularly strong conversion pressures which would provide a substantial threat to agricultural lands (Sternamen and Mumby, 1989).

These landscape transitions are commonly characterized in the literature as being representative of a shift away from productivist landscapes toward post-productivist and, increasingly, multifunctional landscapes. Productivism, a term which first came into currency during the late 20th century, refers to agricultural systems and landscapes in which the main goal of the agricultural sector was the maximal production of food and fiber, increases in efficiency and intensification, heavy reliance on government subsidy, and increasing integration into national and international markets (Lowe *et al*. 1993; Lyson *et al.* 1999). The release and conversion of agricultural land which has resulted from agricultural restructuring the 20th century has resulted in what many theorists during the 1990s began to refer to as 'post-productive' landscapes, in which non-agricultural land uses (especially residential and second-home development, recreational uses) have become increasingly common.

The characterization of these landscapes as 'post-productive' has, however, been heavily criticized in recent years for, despite an overall loss of agricultural lands, the maintenance of agriculture within some areas, the intensification of production and modern efficiencies in technology and management have brought about an increase in gross production within these landscapes (Lyson *et al* 1999), along with the rise of alternative agricultural operations which focus, for example, on local direct sales of fruits and vegetables, as well as specialty and value-added products such as cheeses, cut flowers, and wine (Lyson and Green, 1999; Seyfang, 2006). The term *multifunctional landscapes* (or "working landscapes") has a number of conceptual and practical advantages in that it recognizes the continued importance of agricultural production within these landscapes (while, at the same time, acknowledging the movement away from predominantly agricultural landscapes), it is a positive characterization (that is, not 'post' anything), it is reflective of the spatial and temporal heterogeneity which is characteristic of these areas, and does not necessarily imply a particular trajectory of change (McCarthy, 2005).

Despite advances in the literature that have moved us toward a more spatially- and socially-sensitive understanding of landscape change which acknowledges both the continued importance of traditional and alternative agricultural production as well as a variety of non-agricultural land uses, research has largely remained at a structural level, explaining aggregate landscape changes within the context of agricultural policy and macroeconomics. There remain, therefore, a number of gaps in our existing knowledge relating to both the drivers and outcomes of these landscape changes at the level of individual farmer owners and operators (McCarthy, 2005). While the importance of farmer worldview (Winter 1997) and attitudes (Burton and Wilson, 2006; Wilson, 2008) has been noted within this discourse, analyses of change have only begun to critically analyze individual-level processes such as the inconsistency between structure and agency (Wilson, 2008) or the role of the 'acting subject' (Walford, 2003; Halfacree, 2006), or the importance of diversity between farming types.

Here I propose to interrogate the differential impacts of change on the processes of farmer identity formation and maintenance within particular social and ecological spaces. Within this broader question, I will engage with a number of nested sub-questions such as: What sets of identity-based commitments and self-held meanings are operative amongst farmers within these landscapes? What processes mediate the relationship between landscape change and the emergence, maintenance and verification of farmer identities? How do farmer identities within these landscapes relate to agricultural practices and what impact might this have on the social and biophysical space? What might be the significance of the divergence (and convergence) of diverse farmer identity features within these spaces?

The answers to these questions are of critical importance for our understanding of landscape change within specific social and biophysical spaces not only because the self-held meanings and values of individual farmers drive on-farm decision-making and agricultural behaviors, but also because the specific content of farmer identities within these spaces plays an important role in shaping the

emergence of (potentially new) social networks of exchange and trust, the *sine qua non* of local level sustainability within these transitional landscapes (Wilson, 2008).

The New York Landscape: Agricultural Abandonment and the Return of the Forests

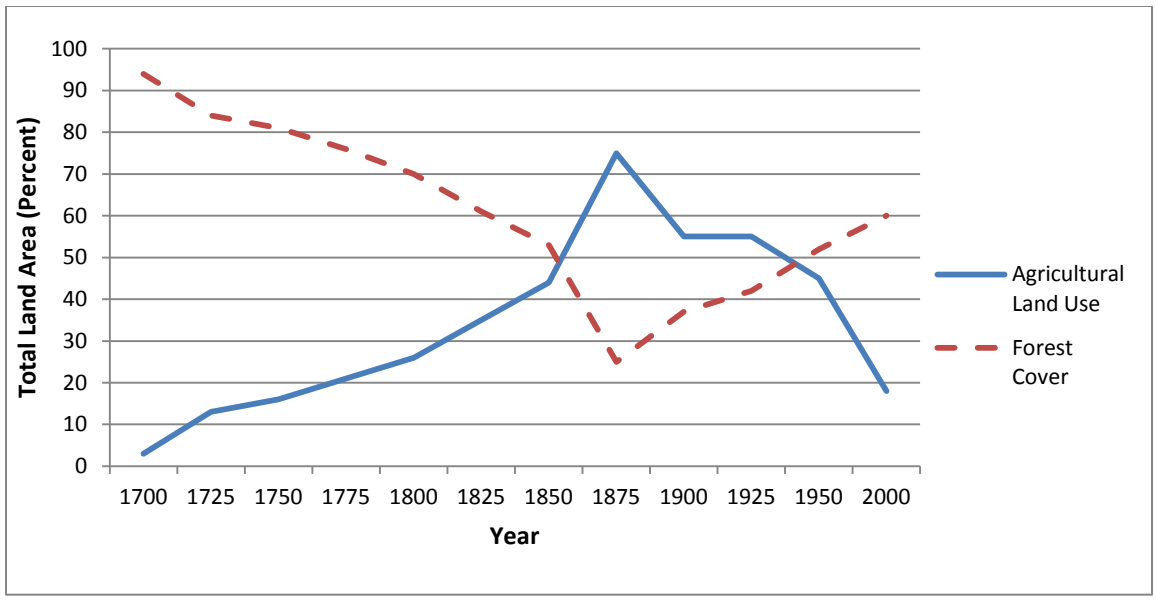
The landscapes of New York State have, in recent decades, been significantly impacted by the dynamics of agricultural restructuring in ways which reflect many of the changes characteristic of (post)agricultural transitions throughout many advanced nations and, as such, presents an important context in which to interrogate the relationship between landscape change and farmer identity processes.

Prior to European settlement, it is estimated that as much of 95% of the landscape was covered with closed-canopy forest (Lorimer, 2001). The outward movement of European settlers north and west from the Long Island Sound during the 18th and 19th centuries had a formative impact on the history of New York's landscape. The clearance of forest (largely for timber and pulp) and its replacement with agricultural land uses had reached its zenith by the end of the 19th century at which time agriculture dominated more than 75% of the landscape (Stanton and Bills, 1996; Swaney *et al*. 2006).

Agricultural production, crops and breeds during this period also underwent significant changes. While wheat production dominated New York's agricultural sector through the late 18th and early 19th Centuries (Anderson, 1932), soil degradation, pest infestation and the opening of western farms caused the rapid decline of wheat during the period during the 1840s. By 1850, cow-based dairy production came to dominate the state's agriculture, a role which it has maintained until the present. At the turn of the 21st Century, New York State ranks third in the nation for diary production Bills, 2001). While dairy-

based agriculture dominates 56% of total agricultural production, recent decades have seen the rise of many new crops and breeds, many of which are marketed locally through Farmers' Markets and other forms of direct marketing, providing a symbolic challenge to the historical conflation of 'agriculture" with "dairy" throughout the state.

Figure 1: Estimation of Landscape Change Across New York State (1700 to 2000)



Sources: Stanton and Bills, 1996; Lorimer, 2001; Flinn and Velland, 2005.

Land use within the state has changed considerably over the last century. From the end of the 19th century, agricultural land uses had begun to decline across the state (figure 1). Structural changes in agricultural economics (Albrecht, 1997; Lyson and Green, 1999; Lobao and Meyer, 2001), the rapid ascendency of Midwestern conglomerate grain farming[1]and the constraints of New York's landscape (including, for instance, shallow soils and sloping topography) has led to the successive abandonment of

[1] An important feature of agricultural restructuring—particularly in the Midwestern and Western United States—has been the merger of farms, and incorporation of farm-ownership, into large-scale conglomerate operations.

family farming as a dominant livelihood strategy across the state, resulting in a broad-based conversion toward an increasingly heterogeneous and, arguably, multifunctional landscape where fewer, though larger, milk operations are mixed with other agricultural and non-agricultural land uses in a landscape increasingly dominated by forest cover.

Despite significant reductions in the amount of land under cultivation in New York State, agricultural intensification, increased applications of inorganic fertilizers and pesticides, and the introduction of improved crops and breeds has substantially increased the productivity of remaining farms leading to a general increase in agricultural productivity (Bills, 2001). These increases in per-unit agricultural productivity have not, in general, led to broad-based improvement in the well-being of many farmers, as significant price volatility and increasing cost of inputs (particularly grain-based feeds from the Midwest) have contributed to substantial financial losses, increasing debt burdens, and narrow profit margins (Lyson *et al*. 1999; Lobao and Meyer, 2001).

Methods

In order to interrogate the processes of identity formation and maintenance, the influence of contextual factors and the meanings which farmers attribute to landscape, I followed a qualitative research approach which focused primarily upon in-depth interviews with farmers throughout the study region. The selection of qualitative research approaches for the interrogation of farmer identity processes within these transitional landscapes was determined by a number of criteria. Among other factors, the consideration that qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to understanding the process of identity formation and maintenance, and ways in which various features of the social and physical context play a role in these processes. Maxwell (2005, p. 22) identifies three major lines of enquiry,

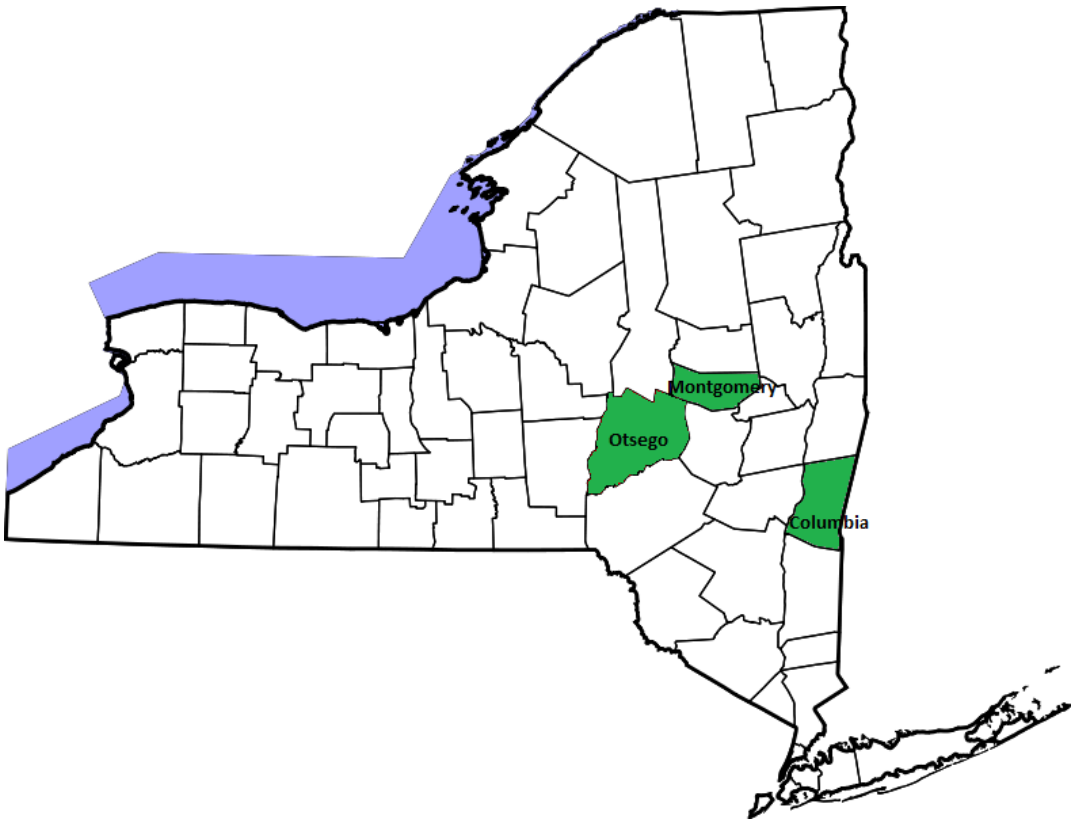
relevant to our purposes here, that are particularly suited to qualitative approaches: (1) understanding the meanings which individuals attribute to the events, processes and attributes within their context; (2) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences and generating new, 'grounded' theories[2] (see also Glaser and Strauss, 1967), and (3) the *process* by which events take place more than the outcomes of those process (see also Marriam, 1988).

While a quantitative analysis of variance between diverse social and biophysical factors within these landscapes and the sets of farmer identities present might form an important second step in developing our understanding of these transitional landscapes, the categories of identity present, their attributes and process, and the relevance of particular contextual factors is currently lacking for two reasons. First, farmer identity research within the transitional landscapes in general is only very nascent in the literature (Walford, 2003, and Halfacree, 2006) and second, that which has been done has been largely restricted to Europe and Australia, settings which may differ significantly from these landscapes (McCarthy, 2005).

Because of the particular emphasis which qualitative approaches place on the elucidation of local-level processes and the importance of context-dependent attributes, I purposefully selected study sites which were (1) determined to be representative of areas in which these processes were likely to be occurring (2) represented a variety of such contexts and (3) would allow for regular, sustained interaction with local farmers. I selected three counties: Otsego, Montgomery and Columbia (see figure 2) each—to varying degrees and along somewhat different trajectories—present landscapes undergoing transition away from agriculture toward increasing forest cover and/or residential conversion.

[2] Versus quantitative approaches to social research, which typically require some prior knowledge of these phenomena

Figure 2: Study Counties



These counties were selected in order to provide a diversity of social and biophysical settings in which to explore farmer identity processes (rather than cases for explicit county-level comparison) and to minimize the bias of site-specific features which might result from analysis of a single site (Burton *et al.* 2008). Columbia County, which is impacted by its proximity to New York City, provides a context in which there has been a rapid increase in the number of neo-agrarian farmer types, rising concerns over the expansion of residential developments, and a thriving local economy. Columbia has seen the most significant landscape-level changes, losing more than 70% of total farmland since the late 19th Century, during which time its forest cover tripled. Otsego County, where forest cover has more than doubled during this same period, coincident with more than 70% loss of farmland, has similarly been affected by the emergence of many new forms of agricultural production and growing urban centers (Cooperstown

and Oneonta). Montgomery County, by contrast, has experienced a declining population, a relatively stagnant economic sector following the abandonment of the Erie Canal [over a century ago] and redevelopment as a major trade corridor (Thomas and Smith, 2009), and little representation from neo-agrarian farmers. Farmland loss since the late 19th Century has been slowest, with total losses estimated to be less than 50% (a considerably slower rate of farmland loss than New York State as experienced during this same period, at 68%) coincident with significant forest re-growth.

In order to minimize the bias which might be introduced by restricting the pool of potential participants, initial participants in each county were sought through a number of different entry-points (following research precedents such as those employed by Burton *et al.* 2008). These included the Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Farm Service Agency and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts (both of the United State Department of Agriculture), local farmers' markets, and personal and institutional contacts. The initial criterion-based selection (LeCompte and Prieslle, 1993) of participant farmers provided through these entry-points was intentionally broad in order to incorporate a wide variety of perspectives, and included individuals who engage in a diversity of agricultural production systems within the study sites, and who reside on (and actively manage) farming operations which gross at least $1,000 in sales per annum (consistent with the United States Department of Agriculture's definition of a 'farm,' USDA-ERS, 2011). Following this initial round of interviews, subsequent participant selection followed snow-ball sampling methodology (Lobley and Potter, 2004; Burton *et al.* 2008) through which I sought to identify and specifically elicit the insights of individuals whose perspectives may not have been included in the original set of participants. The selection of the latter, potentially variant participants was in accordance with previous approaches to identifying diverse perspectives, or Guba and Lincoln's

(1978) “maximum variant sampling”. In total, 30 farmers (19 male and 11 female) participated in twenty separate in-depth interviews, dispersed throughout the three study counties[3].

Farmers’ responses were elicited through interactive, semi-structured interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), each of which lasted between 1 and 4 hours, and were carried out on-farm, engaging with questions of farm history, structure, production practices, the farmer’s self-held meanings for the role of farmer in society, and their commentary on agricultural changes in their local area and beyond[4]. Interviews were recorded using a Sony ICD-P620 audio recording device, a method determined to be superior to manual note-taking in its ability to minimize researcher bias[5], supply “rich data” (Maxwell, 2005) and to allow for subsequent validity checks (addressed below). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

In addition to the collection of interview data, I also collected observational data through on-farm visits, participatory farm work, participation in farmer-group discussions[6], and prolonged engagement with numerous participant farmers in the study. Observational data was used to contextualize participants’ comments and insights, as well as to the support my characterization of farm types and other attributes relevant to the exploration of identity meanings and on-farm behaviors.

Analysis of Interview Data

Preliminary analysis began during early rounds of interviews through the review of field notes and audio transcripts and, subsequently, with coding of the interview transcripts through the use of ATLAS.ti qualitative research software. The coding of interview transcript data relied both upon *emic* (concepts

[4] Please see ‘Interview Guide’ attached as an Appendix.
[5] Manual notes taken during interviews tend to be highly interpretive, and the original words of the participants cannot be revisited later.
[6] Columbia-4’s farm hosts monthly Farmers’ Research Circles in which many local farmers convene to discuss issues of common concern, listen to research presentations on agricultural issues, etc.

and categories put forward directly by participants themselves) as well *etic* categories (those which I distilled from participant data). The development of these emergent categories began early in the research process, and was subsequently refined or corrected through lumping and splitting of categories as the concepts took shape. Analysis of these coded categories emphasized their relationship to one another, and other conceptual linkages (through the process of concept mapping) which helped to elucidate farmer identity processes and local contextual factors. Tracking of emergent themes throughout the data collection process through the use of coded categories also facilitated the formation of nascent hypotheses, which were explored during subsequent interviews.

Measures to Strengthen Validity

The validity of qualitative research rests largely upon the evidence brought to bear in the formulation of its hypotheses and conclusions, and the plausibility of testing these explanations in the 'real world' (Maxwell, 2005). Because the researcher *is the instrument* in qualitative approaches to social research, measures to support the validity of my research focused on analysis of my own subjectivities and biases, seeking to understand and profit from the way in which they operated through the research process. In addition to this continual monitoring of my own subjectivities, a number of strategies were employed (below) in order to strengthen the validity of the insights and hypotheses which emerged from the data.

The Assessment of Rich Data

Audio-recording of the interviews was employed as a preferable alternative to hand-written notes due to the latter's greater susceptibility to the interviewer's inferences and selective summation. Transcripts were produced from the audio recordings to provide a richer source of data than interview notes, allowing me to regularly revisit the interviews to refine, or refute, emergent hypotheses.

Respondent Validation

The researcher's own inference and interpretation of participants' statements can present a threat to validity in the research process. To mitigate this effect, I commonly phrased back to the participants my understanding of their statements in order to check the accuracy of my understanding and to allow for these member-checked statements to be captured by the audio recording.

Searching for Discrepant Evidence and Negative Cases

This validity-enhancing strategy was carried through two means. First, throughout the research process I regularly reviewed the interview transcripts in order to identify data that might contradict emergent hypotheses and conclusions. Second, subsequent rounds of participant interviews intentionally sought out who might offer contradictory perspectives of insights, in order to avoid the bias of selecting only those participants who might agree with my own emergent hypotheses.

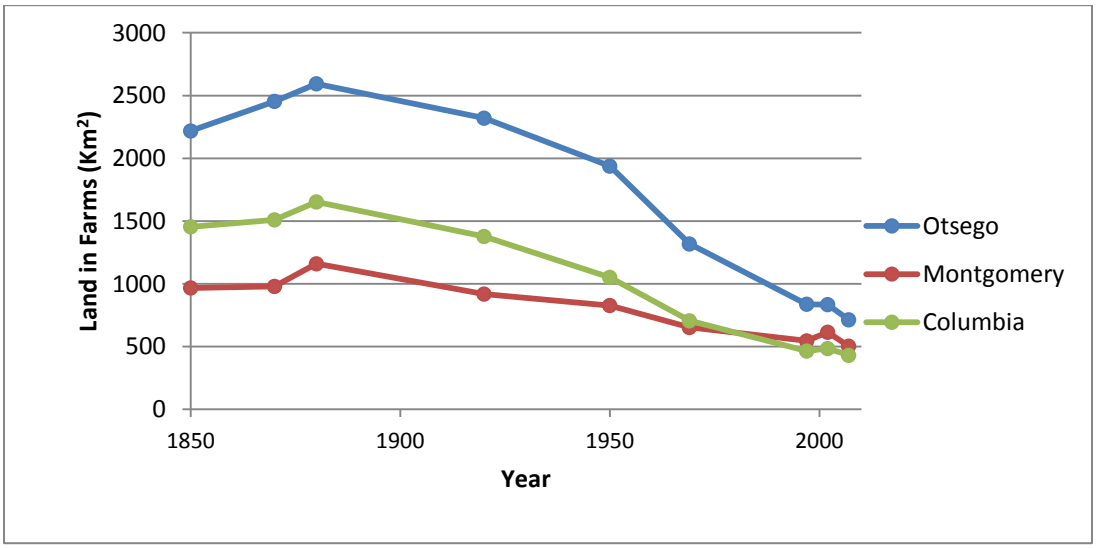
The Use of Secondary Data

Secondary data relating to crop production, areal extent of land use types and changes through time, and demography were also collected for the purpose of characterizing the nature of agricultural and landscape status and change in each of the selected study counties. In keeping with the relative strengths of the qualitative research approach, analyses of land use change, forest cover, and agricultural history were carried out in order to provide a general characterization of research contexts (for instance, change over time), to provide reference points against which to analyze the farmers' own interpretation of change and the meanings which farmers attribute to these changes, and to situate identity processes within their social and biophysical context.

The Changing Landscapes of Otsego, Montgomery and Columbia Counties

Each county has experienced a significant decrease in the amount of land in agriculture (figure 3), though to somewhat different degrees. During the period from 1875 to 2007, New York State lost approximately 68% of its total farmland. During this same period, Otsego and Columbia Counties each lost a slightly higher percentage of their total farmland (71% for each) while Montgomery lost only 49% of its total agricultural land.

Figure 3: Land in Farms in Selected Counties (1850-2007) [7]



Source: USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service

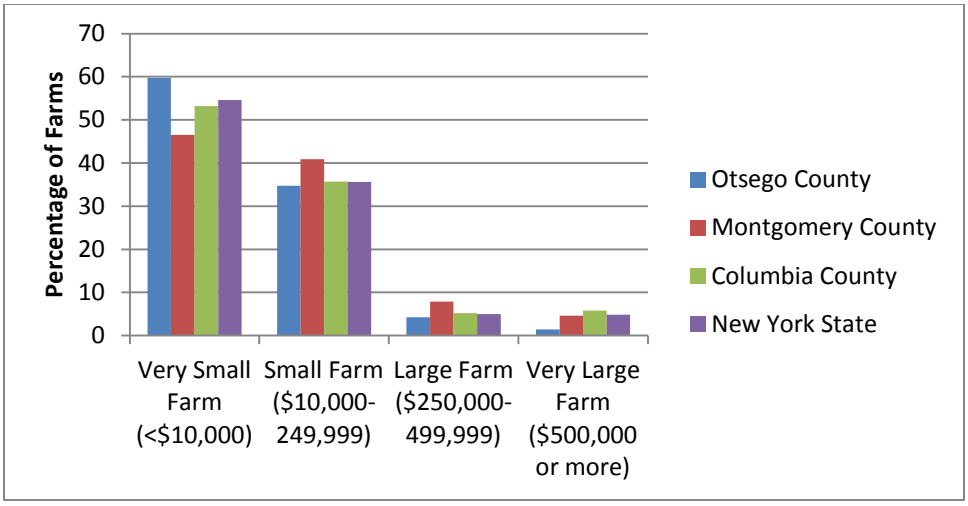
Otsego and Columbia Counties have each experienced not only a more rapid rate of farmland loss, but also have seen the greatest overall decreases in average farm size, which stands in marked contrast to national trends toward increasing average farm size (Lyson *et al.* 1999), suggestive of a movement toward small-holding rather than conglomeration. Montgomery County, by contrast, which has retained a larger proportion of its agricultural land, also has larger average farm sizes than either Otsego or

[7] The historical adjustment of county boundaries disallows presentation of land uses as proportion of total county area. Data presented here indicates the pace and directionality of land use change within selected counties, rather than providing within- or between-county comparison of total land covers.

Montgomery. During the decade from 1998 to 2008, for example, Otsego County's average farm size decreased 18%, from 216 to 177 acres. Columbia County during this period decreased 14% (221 to 190 acres), while Montgomery's average farm size decreased by only 9.4% (from 223 to 202 acres).

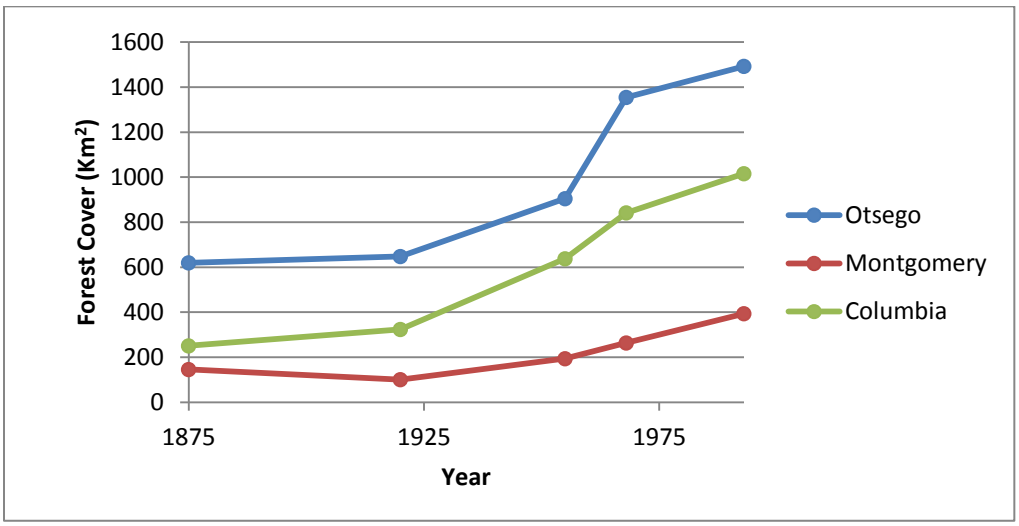
While, on the whole, the last century could be characterized as a period of massive transition away from agriculture in the landscapes of each county, recent years have seen an important counter-trend in the rise of small farms which currently dominate the agricultural landscape in each county. The United States Department of Agriculture and the National Commission on Small Farms define a small farm according to production figures (rather than area under cultivation, for instance) as one which realizes less than $250,000 in gross sales (USDA-ERS, 2011). The National Commission on Small Farms makes a further subdivision between those farms with fewer than $10,000 in sales and those small farms whose sales total between $10,000 and $249,999. According to this definition, small farms in this smallest category comprise the vast majority of farming operations within each county (figure 4). Montgomery County, though dominated by small farms, varies somewhat in that it has a relatively larger share of large farms (in the category of farms realizing more than $250,000 in sales) than either Otsego or Columbia Counties. Otsego County ranks highest in the proportion and number of small farms with less than $10,000 in gross sales, and with the smallest proportion of farms in the highest two sales categories.

Figure 4: Proportion of Farms by Sales Class in Selected Counties (2007)



Source: United States Department of Agriculture, National Statistics Service, 2011

Figure 5: Forest Cover Change in Selected Counties (1875-1993) [8]



Source: Stanton and Bills, 1992; NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, 2011

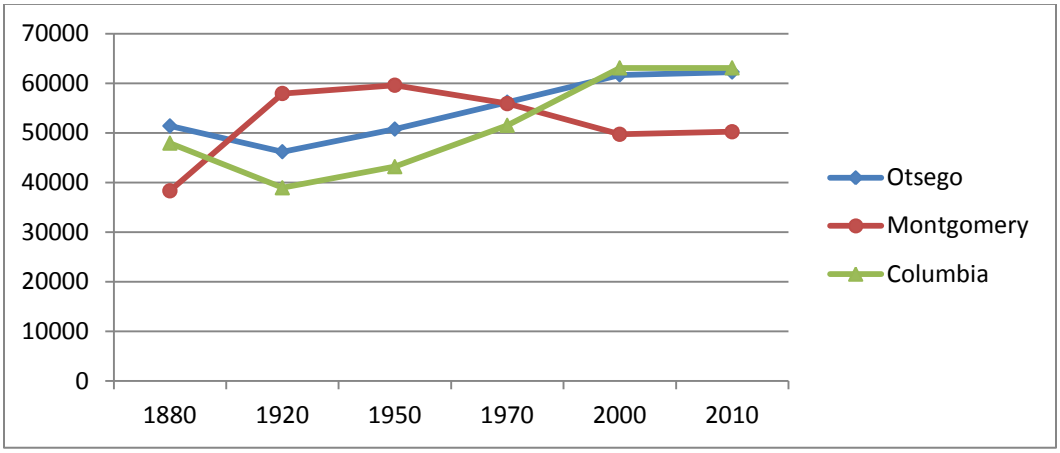
Consistent with trends throughout the state, farm closure and the abandonment of agricultural lands have resulted in significant forest regrowth in each county (figure 5). The pace of these changes in each county has, however, been quite different. While forest regrowth in Otsego and Montgomery Counties has been fairly similar to overall trends in New York State (140% and 170% increases in forest cover

[8] Refer to footnote 1.

since 1875, respectively). Columbia County, by contrast, has seen a threefold increase in forest cover during this same period. These trends are significant for, unlike many transitional landscapes analyzed within the existing literature (for example, Hirschl and Bills, 1994; Hiemstra and Bushwick, 1989; Lobao and Meyer, 2001; Lobley and Potter, 2004; Brown et al. 2005), these landscapes are characterized *primarily* by a transition away from agriculture toward forest regrowth rather than residential expansion. While any sort of post-agricultural transition may be expected to have important implications for farmer identity processes and local agricultural production, that these landscapes are transitioning along *this* particular trajectory is important in terms of the differential social and ecological impacts of forest regrowth (versus urban development) and the set of meanings which these landscapes are able to sustain (Halfacree, 2006). Hirschl and Bills (1994) had anticipated this trend, observing that the threats of exurban expansionism in the New York context were largely over-blown outside of the New York Metropolitan area.

With the opening of the Erie Canal in the late 19th Century, Montgomery County experienced rapid population growth (figure 6) along with significant growth in the amount of farmland under cultivation (Hedrick, 1966). Consistent with the general trend of rural depopulation in upstate New York during the mid- to latter- 20th century (Thomas and Smith, 2009), however, Montgomery County has experienced a decline, losing fully 19% of its population since 1950. The experience of Otsego and Columbia Counties, however, stands in marked contrast to this for while each experienced a declining population during the years following 1880, the population of each has been growing since the 1920s (32% and 62%, respectively).

Figure 6: Population Change in Selected Counties (1880-2010)



Source: United States Census Bureau

Results

The historic dominance of particular (dairy-based) systems of agricultural production within each county has shaped the rural character along particular lines and, with it, the popular conception of the term 'farmer' which, though often unarticulated, refers to 'dairy farmer'. Indeed, amongst farmers interviewed, there was a marked ambivalence amongst all producers in the self-ascription of the term 'farmer', with the exception of dairy operators who, by dint of both their historical as well as contemporary predominance, have retained the term as an expression of their self-identity. Other farmers tend to qualify the term, not only for themselves but also in reference to their non-dairy agricultural neighbors, through the use of diverse hyphenated prefixes: organic-farmer, biodynamic-farmer, hobby-farmer, gentleman-farmer, play-farmer, old-world farmer, vegetable-farmer, *and gardener*. The use of the hyphenated qualification is significant for it indicates not only the diversity of self-identities present within the agricultural community and reflective of the sort of social heterogeneity predicted to characterize multifunctional landscapes (McCarthy, 2005), but also a tacit

acknowledgement of the historical conflation of New York farming and *dairy*. Across all counties, the phrases "*this is dairy country*"[9], "*agriculture is dairy*"[10], "*real farming always involves animal husbandry, usually Holsteins*"[11], etc. typified dairy farmers' descriptions of their landscape.

Despite the historical dominance of "farmer" as "dairy farmer", the pace and extent of farm closure presents a substantial threat to these identity claims, and a source of anxiety for many traditional farmers. One dairy farmer in Otsego County[12] explained "*when we started in farming, there were farms all around. Now there are only four in the whole town*." The social impact of the disappearance of traditional dairy farms from the landscape is significant for many traditional farmers who express a sense of increasing isolation. One traditional dairy farmer in Otsego County lamented the loss of neighboring farms, "*we used to get together with other farm families. Now, we are busy, they are busy… no one has time anymore*.[13]" Not only has the loss of other dairy farms resulted in social isolation, but also decreased cash flow in recent years has, for some dairy farmers, led to the loss of hired labor and increasing labor burdens put on the family, limiting opportunities for social interaction. "*We just don't get out anymore. It used to be that the hired man could cover for us and we could go out. Not any more. Just work, work, work*.[14]" While increasing work loads, financial shortfalls and the loss of hired labor added further limitations to some farmers' availability to connect socially with others in the community, prosperous farms expressed a similar sense of disconnect from the local community. One well-off dairy farmer in Otsego County[15], whose farm employed eight hired-hands was explicit: "*We tend not to be involved in the community much…. I don't spend a lot of time with other farmers. Our next door*

[9] Montgomery-1
[10] A County Director of the Farm Service Agency
[11] Columbia-7
[12] Otsego-1
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Montgomery-1
[15] Otsego-2

neighbor... he is really the only one. Sometimes we used to get together with the other big farms… I don't know as we meet anymore."

This loss of social relationships between farmers is reflected by a similar trend in the breakdown of formal farmer organizations. While farmer organizations such as the Grange and Farm Bureau, as well as milk cooperatives, played an important role in New York's agricultural development (Colman, 1965; Hedrick, 1966), the relevance of these organizations for farmers interviewed in these counties were minimal. The loss of these organizations is significant along several dimensions, not least of which was the historic role these organizations played in bringing farmer together with other farmers and providing recreation. A multi-generational conventional dairyman in Montgomery observed, *"We used to be involved in our [milk] cooperative, and would travel with them to meetings around the country. For most of us, that was our vacation each year… but this is not the way anymore. We don't really go out.*[16]*"* Significantly, only one conventional dairy farmer[17] amongst those interviewed was active in any formal farmer organization[18].

The social isolation expressed by these farmers is reflected in the biophysical transformation of the landscape. The loss of farms on the landscape presents important visual cues reifying these changes and reinforcing a sense of loss and dissociation. For one retired farmer, whose family had farmed in the same community in Otsego County since the 1700s, the loss of farming families was symbolized by these biophysical changes: "*when I go around this area, it makes me depressed. Farm after farm has gone out. The cows are no longer on the hills*.[19]*"* Another dairy farmer[20] also lamented "*once a farm goes out,*

[16] Montgomery-1
[17] Montgomery-3, who had served as past-president of the American Jersey Cattle Association
[18] Membership in the New York Farm Bureau, which styles itself as the 'Voice of New York Farmers,' remains high (largely, according to interviewees, because membership in the Farm Bureau is required for access to the preferential insurance programs offered by the Bureau), a fact which has been touted as a proxy for farmer approval of the Bureau and involvement. Nevertheless, farmers interviewed in all three counties were almost unanimously disapproving of the Farm Bureau and doubted their interest in the well-being of small farmers.
[19] Otsego-3

something else crops up and the land will never go back… you will never see gladiolas again along Route 28." The changes in these transitional landscapes—the loss of neighboring farms, increasing forest cover and other non-agricultural land uses—have removed many of the historic referents of traditional dairy-farmer identity.

The social and psychological impacts of farm disappearance are, for many farmers interviewed, mitigated by the strength of their own identity claims and that of farm- and heritage-ties which may play a significant role in farm decisions. One traditional dairy farmer in Montgomery County[21], for instance, whose farm had been in the family for several generations following their original acquisition of a fifty-acre parcel in 1723, poignantly expressed the complicated ties and constraints of his historically-rooted farmer identity and its relation to farm inheritance. "*My family history here has led me to make [poor] economic choices… this is about the worst state for farming. If it weren't for family history on this farm I would be out of here."* Volatile milk prices, rising taxes and the costs of grain feeds had led, in recent years to substantial and, by his estimation irrecoverable, financial losses. The threat to his own identity as a farmer was exacerbated by the need to retain the farm because of this history. *"If we sold off everything [including the cows], we could just clear out even and keep the original fifty acres—this is precious to me. It would be worth it. But what would the next generation do?"* Though he was pessimistic about the future of dairy farming, he and his daughter hoped that she would find a way to carry on with the farm. For some, this attachment to the farm itself formed a commitment super-ordinate to the operation of the farm. A multi-generational (organic) dairy farmer in Otsego County shared this conviction: *"We would be devastated if we had to sell the farm… we have never talked in these terms. We have talked about selling the cows. We would never farm anywhere else.*[22]"

[20] Otsego-1
[21] Montgomery-1
[22] Otsego-1

Farm attachment, while often being framed in terms of family history, was no less salient for some first and second-generation farmers, whose connection to their farm was based on their personal investment in the land, instantiated through labor. One first-generation conventional dairy operator in Columbia County[23], whose land had been put into an agricultural easement through a local land trust explained, *"I love this farm. You would understand if you had picked the stones that I have picked off this farm… [I am] too much connected to it to be able to walk away."* For another producer[24], who runs a greenhouse-based business and raises a small replacement herd of Holsteins, her tie to the farm was symbolized by a particular geographic feature, *"we can't move… the 'natural bridge' out back [a stone outcropping bridging a stream, used as a cow path]-the farm is named for it. This is just home… sorry, you hit a soft spot there… This is where I grew up. This farm <u>is</u> home*" (her emphasis).

These ties to historicity and place are clearly strained by what many traditional dairy producers perceive as a context in which their identity-based meanings and normative claims on the landscape are increasingly out-of-place. "*It used to be that farming was a living here, now, I don't know. Where is a small [dairy] farmer to go*?[25]" While these farm-based ties provide a psychological resource mitigating the effects of landscape changes, they are also expressed as constraints, tying some traditional farmers to places and practices which are increasingly difficult to maintain.

Columbia and Otsego County in particular, while still predominantly in dairy, support numerous non-dairy farming operations which differ markedly in their commitments, self-perception and modes of engagement in the community. While the diversity of agricultural practices, crops and breeds that are employed in these operations (and their rather more diverse self-conceptions of what it means to be a farmer) complicates a simple characterization of these non-dairy operations, I will refer to them collectively as 'neo-agrarian' in that they exhibit some important similarities. In the first place, neo-

[23] Columbia-1
[24] Montgomery-7
[25] Montgomery-1

agrarian farmers are typically not involved in cow-based dairy production[26], they tend to be located near—or market to—growing population centers[27], engage in direct sales through CSAs, U-Pick operations, Farmers' Markets or farm stands, tend to share multifunctional commitments regarding the role of the farmer as "*doing something more than just producing commodities*[28]", or the evaluation of a good farmer as "*a steward of the land… [who] wants to give something to the community*,[29]" and usually employ low-chemical or organic practices in their farm operations. Because farmer identities consist of fuzzy sets of commitments, self-perceptions and modes of practical engagement with the world around them, the distinction drawn here between traditional (usually conventional dairy, productivist, and often multi-generational) farmers in these landscapes and the collection of various identities and practices I am classing as 'neo-agrarian' farmers (though a distinction commonly drawn by the farmers themselves) is not a clean distinction and masks several important distinctions in identity categories, commitments and meanings. Some of these distinctions relate to differences in practices and on-farm behaviors while, in other cases, the distinctions relate more to the motivations behind their commitments, and the meaning attached to their practices. Neo-agrarian farming operations varied from certified organic dairy operation[30] (for whom small-holding and environmentally-sensitive small-holding was an expression of what they saw as pre-productivist traditional farming) to small, organic fruit and vegetables farms oriented toward local consumers[31], or organic cheese production for regional markets[32]. The core values, commitments and motivations behind these enterprises varied from family-

[26] There are important exceptions to this, including a small, but important, number of organic dairy producers who belong to Organic Valley cooperative who, though typically multi-generational dairy farmers, share many post-productivist values similar to many neo-agrarian farmers.
[27] All but two farmers classed as neo-agrarian farmers in the study were from Otsego and Columbia Counties, and depended heavily on sales to growing urban centers nearby. One of the two neo-agrarians in Montgomery County (Montgomery-6) sold exclusively to Otsego County and New York City.
[28] Columbia-3
[29] Otsego-4
[30] Otsego-1
[31] Otsego-3, Montgomery-5 and 6, Columbia-2,5,6 and 8.
[32] Otsego-5

centered Christian commitment to small-holding[33], to spiritualist values of organic connection between people and the earth (articulated most clearly by various Anthroposophist farmers[34]), to humanist commitments to local sustainability and the well-being of future generations and the natural environment[35].

Neo-agrarian farms comprise only a small proportion of total land area and agricultural production. While traditional family dairy farms continue to dominate the landscape in terms of land area and their share of agricultural production, neo-agrarian farmers, because of their engagement with the non-farming communities through direct marketing, have increasingly become the face of local farming for many communities. The relatively higher visibility of many neo-agrarian farmers within the community magnifies their 'real' presence on the landscape (both in terms of the number of farmers, and the actual land area under their management) with potentially important social and psychological consequences for the identity claims of traditional dairy farmers and of the landscape as a "dairy farming landscape". Seventy-one percent of the cropped land area in Columbia County, for example, is devoted to dairy, forage and feed grains, managed largely by family-owned productivist farming operations (USDA-Census of Agriculture, 2007). The Columbia County-based Hudson Farmers' Market website bears the advertisement "*Come be part of what makes Columbia County great—Agriculture at its best! Support our local family farms and you will be doing your part to keep your Country green and growing*" (Hudson Farmers' Market, 2011), despite carrying none of these dominant agricultural products.

Landscape change in Montgomery County has lagged somewhat behind the changes which have occurred in Otsego and Columbia, perhaps providing a context less threatening to traditional dairy-based farmer identities and, conversely, less supportive of the performance of neo-agrarian identity

[33] Montgomery-5
[34] Columbia-4,5,7 and 8. Anthroposophism is a spiritual movement founded on the writings of Rudolf Steiner, emphasizing inner consciousness through imagination and intuition, applied to practical engagement with the natural world (Wikipedia: Anthroposophist, 2011).
[35] Otsego-4, Montgomery-6, Columbia-1,2 and 3.

types. In these landscapes, characterized by persistent outmigration, a stagnant economy, a slower rate of farmland loss and slower forest regrowth, there has been only a small, and fairly isolated, set of emerging neo-agrarian producers. One such farmer in Montgomery County[36], whose organic CSA serves only non-local customers, expressed this sense of isolation. "*We are a total island here. If it weren't for our farm, there is no way we would stay here… We are surrounded by old dairy farmers. The only other farmer I really talk to is a friend of mine in California."*

Small Farmers in a "Small Landscape"

While numerous farmer identity types co-exist within these transitional landscapes, the degree to which farmers consider the landscapes as supportive of their identity varies considerably. Traditional dairy farmers whose primary identity is that of 'agricultural producers' regard the socioeconomic and topographic constraints of the landscape as a critical weakness in the performance of their identity (restricting farm parcel sizes, disallowing efficient conglomeration, and limiting operations in general, factors which all contribute to a sense of competitive disadvantage in an increasingly large dairy industry). One productivist dairy farmer in Montgomery[37] explained, "*I have been to farms all over the country. We are not like them. We are different up here… we are just not big like they are. Part of the problem here in New York is that we do not have enough land to get rid of our manure wastes—too many rivers and streams*." For others, the lack of contiguous farming parcels[38], high land taxes[39], and a degree of forest cover[40] were all factors limiting the scale of farming operations. These social and

[36] Montgomery-6
[37] Montgomery-3
[38] Columbia-6
[39] Montgomery-
[40] Columbia-7

biophysical limitations of the landscape present practical obstacles to farm profitability, and thus to the verification of productivist farmer identity. A multigenerational dairy farmer, who milks 110 Holsteins in Montgomery[41] said, "*economy-of-size efficiency is our real limitation. The big farms elsewhere get all the breaks. This is the real problem*. *Where is the small farmer to go?"*

Neo-agrarians in the study, by contrast, typically recast the meaning of these small, mostly "natural" landscapes, as ones which directly support the identity-based meanings which are core to their understanding of what it means to be a farmer. While neighboring productivist farms may bear some similarities to 'factory farms' in the west, many communicate a sense that such agriculture is particularly not suited to the landscapes of their area. One neo-agrarian CSA farmer[42] predicted the end of local 'commodity farming', stating, "*I don't think this kind of farming has a future, not at least in Columbia County… because of the landscape—it is so mixed , and mostly forested, believe it or not, it is not an industrial landscape. It has one advantage though: a huge population base. But this forces you to relate to the customers*." A very similar sentiment was expressed by another first generation farm-stand operator and farmer in Columbia County, who observed "*this landscape simply does not allow for commodity production, it is too broken-up… this county is mostly forest now, and hills. This is a small-farming area.[43]"*

This positive 'smallness' of the agricultural landscape, most pronounced in Otsego and Columbia Counties which have growing population centers, shrinking farm sizes and recent increases in both the number of small farms and the amount of land no longer dominated by human uses, has created a landscape which fosters the elaboration of these small farmer identities and associated sets of farm practices which are bundled together with the small farmer identity. Neo-agrarian farmers regularly juxtaposed the goodness of small farming against that of large-scale farming (which, for them,

[41] Montgomery-1
[42] Columbia-3
[43] Columbia-3

characterizes western farms). One neo-agrarian farmer in Montgomery County[44], who had formerly worked at 1,500 cow farms in western North America, was decisive: "*Industrial farms are an abomination. I am against big farms… I think small farmers take better care of their animals, and the land. Small farmers tend to treat people better*.[45]"

The small farmer identity has come to refer not only to size, but also to the performance of agricultural practices that are supposed to be associated with small-farm operations[46]. For neo-agrarians, these practices include low levels of mechanization, organic or natural pest and fertility management, on-farm crop diversity, non-productive values of farmlands (including the conservation of lands within the farm for local biodiversity), and local social engagement through direct-marketing. Rather than presenting an impediment to the verification of their identity, for many neo-agrarians their identity as small farmers was seen primarily as choice—an agential action in their landscape. This sense of agency, of 'choosing' small farming was consistent among neo-agrarians. One neo-agrarian in Montgomery County[47] affirmed this, "*I want to do everything myself, I intentionally scaled down my operation so I could do that… a farm should be no larger than the man*."One neo-agrarian in Columbia County, originally from East Asia was similarly explicit: "*I could get much larger, there would be no difficulty doing that. But would I want to? I do not want to run my farm like a corporation*.[48]" The small farm, according to respondents, variously allows for personal involvement in the land[49], engagement with all aspects of the operation (versus

[44] Montgomery-5
[45] *ibid*
[46] It should be noted here that 'small farming' is itself a fuzzy definition. While USDA classes farm-size based on total sales, the term as used by small-holders themselves refers as much to the revenue of the operation as to its association with the areal extent of cultivated land (that is, not including woodlots), and the focus on family—versus hired—labor, and the other sets of associated practices mentioned in the text above.
[47] Montgomery-5
[48] Columbia-6
[49] Columbia-2

specialization)[50], intimate knowledge of on-farm variations in soil and crops[51] , and creates a social-closeness with other farmers and non-farmers[52].

An organic flower producer in Otsego County tied this 'smallness' to the expression of non-monetary (non-productivist) values. "*I like to see these young people doing farming- they are not just in it for the money. They are choosing a lifestyle that is different. They don't want to be big, just big enough… I think it is pretty amazing that they have chosen a lifestyle, as opposed to not choosing… I think some of the corporate [farm] people just let things go.*[53]"

For two organic dairy operators—both of whom were multi-generational farmers—their decision to switch to organic certification explicitly involved decisions about size. Otsego-1, for example, converted to organic dairy because its preferable pricing was the only way to maintain their self-imposed maximum herd size of 45 cows. Montgomery-2 expressed himself very similarly, "*I went organic because… I felt I needed to do something different because I didn't want to just keep getting bigger. I just wanted to have a family farm*."

Neo-agrarians of all sorts draw a sharp distinction between themselves and industrial, or "factory farms" and associated practices and values (including large-scale monocultures, utilization of pesticides and inorganic fertilizers, high-intensity mechanization, dissociation from local markets, etc) that serve as a primary oppositional category to their own identity. The factory-farmer identity against which neo-agrarians distinguished themselves was, however, unvaryingly cast as non-local by the participants in the study areas. Whatever similarity may exist between such 'factory farmers' and local conventional farming operations (judged from the standpoint of practices, crops, breeds and expressed motivations), this similarity is seldom invoked by neo-agrarians when referencing other local farmers. One younger

[50] Columbia-3
[51] Montgomery-1
[52] Columbia-5
[53] Otsego-4

farmer, who had recently begun an organic farm to produce cheese, insisted "*I would rather they (a local conventional farming family) were here than for their farm to go out. It is better to have any farmer here than no farmer*.[54]" One organic, boutique-farmer in Otsego County characterized this even more starkly. "*I think* [a local conventional farmer]*'s practices are disrespectful to his neighbors and destructive to the earth… I buy from him [nevertheless], mostly because I like his daughter and because I know him, and how he runs his farm*.[55]" Despite expressing strong disapprobation of his farming practices, personal knowledge of the farmer and his position as a 'local farmer' proved decisive for her support of his business.

Because, according to many respondents small-farming is prerequisite to effective engagement with the local (non-agricultural) community, *localism* is an important category which is consistently bundled with 'small farmer' identity commitments and a necessary precondition for locally-responsible farming. While many traditional dairy farmers emphasize their social isolation in the community and their role as producers of staple goods "for the nation," neo-agrarian identity commitments emphasize their social relationships in the community and their role as producers of "*good, healthy food for [our] community.[56]*" One organic small farmer in Otsego County expounded her vision for the future of her landscape, "*the hope I see is… a lot of small farms making a go of it… getting good food into the schools. Giving kids a hope for the future*.[57]"

While neo-agrarians within the study emphasized the importance of this direct local engagement as exemplary of post-productivist farmer commitments, these farmers themselves were largely non-local. Of those neo-agrarians interviewed, 89% (n=18) originated non-locally and were not from agricultural backgrounds. The majority were from urban or suburban areas (83%, n=18). Non-local origin was not,

[54] Otsego-5
[55] Otsego-4
[56] Columbia-4
[57] Otsego-4

however, expressed by neo-agrarians themselves as an impediment to entering farming nor to the effective expression of their neo-agrarian identity. For many, their decision to relocate to these landscapes was expressly *because* they felt their former (largely urban) homes and landscapes did not allow for bringing together work, home and community relationships. A young couple[58] who had moved from suburban Pennsylvania explained their move to Otsego County as stemming from a desire both to engage in agriculture and as an expression of their localist commitments: "*We have always wanted to commit to a place, and to invest somewhere and see your effort produce something—tying to a particular location... We could do this before, so we moved here."*

Discussion: The Terrain of Agrarian Identity

The rural landscapes of these counties, their meanings and historical association with dairy production, has for many become open to reinterpretation and the counter-narratives of competing landscapes and production modalities. While the traditional family dairy farmer is the common referent of farmer identity within these landscapes, as the '*backbone of the nation*[59],' and the '*producers of staple goods to feed America*[60]' it has been called into question not only by the emergence of neo-agrarian identities within their landscapes, but also by their own economic uncertainty and increasingly marginal place in an American agricultural scene dominated by large Midwestern and western farms. Within Otsego and Columbia Counties, in particular, threats to traditional farmer identities have been exacerbated by increasing public scrutiny and censure for the negative ecological impacts of their practices (such as intensive monocultural production of feed grains, manure disposal, and the use of conventional

[58] Otsego-5
[59] Otsego-1
[60] Otsego-2

pesticides), a feature which has created a heightened sense of rifting between farmers and non-farmers in the community. These shifts in the public perception of the meaning and purpose of rural landscapes—and therefore the role of farmers within those landscapes—are characteristic of emergent multi-functional landscapes in which the public increasingly "demands greater environmental services, amenities… and other public goods from rural areas" (McCarthy, 2005), while also raising new demands in relation to the land and landscape, the treatment of animals and nature (Marsden, 1999). While these traditional farmer identities are clearly threatened—and perhaps especially *because* they are threatened (Bell, 1992)—they yet remain potent in the lives of many producers and continue to be definitive of their self-conceptions as farmers, a fact which lends support to my contention that these landscapes are 'multifunctional,' rather than entirely 'post-productive.'

The overarching commitment to 'small farming" (or smallholding) as an important component of farmer identity is actively supported by landscapes which naturally discourage (though not prohibit) large-holdings, and is a feature which has been noted in several other studies on neo-agrarian farmer identities (see, for example, Halfacree, 2006). The coincidence of small farm parcel sizes, public demand for multifunctional landscapes and a growing market for neo-agrarian products fosters a sense of futurity amongst many neo-agrarians. This overt expression of identity-based agency and futurity amongst intentional small farmers stands in marked contrast to the overwhelming sense of constraint and loss felt by many struggling, traditional dairy operations whose self-held meanings in identity are increasingly marginalized in the social and biophysical space.

The breakdown in many traditional farmer-farmer networks, and the isolation which particularly characterizes many conventional dairy farmers, has allowed for the emergence of new forms of farmer relationships which are increasingly oriented toward non-farmers on the landscape. The increasing importance of farmer-community relationships in identity processes suggests an important shift from

earlier studies in farmer identity processes which emphasized the primary importance of farmer-farmer relationships and the verification of identity through the performance of specific, productivist skill sets. Burton *et al* (2008) observed that a transition from productivist to post-productivist farmer identities (specifically, where farmers engage in behaviors such as the setting aside of conservation easements) may disrupt these traditional mechanisms of identity verification because the skill sets employed—which are referent of productivity versus other non-production values—are potentially less-applicable in the assessment of what constitutes a 'good farmer'. In a similar fashion, the criteria by which farmer capacity is evaluated may be quite different under different evaluative relationships, as might be operative between farmers and non-farmer. Because these farmer-community relationships exist primarily within a particular subset of the community which shares similar commitments relating to civic engagement through farmer-community transactional relationships, the criteria by which the good farmer is assessed may very well focus, not primarily on particular skills sets, but rather on the degree to which the farmer fulfills role expectations relating to their relationship to the community and various environmental commitments. This decreased emphasis on technical skills as the primary evaluative criterion has allowed for the entrance of new farmers not from agricultural backgrounds, with potentially important implications for the persistence of local agriculture by eliminating barriers to occupational entrance.

The fact that new farmer self-conceptualizations—which are articulated both in reference to, and distinction from, preexistent farmer identities—are emergent within a particular social and biophysical space may have important implications for the performance and verification of these diverse identities. Group identity theorists emphasize not only the importance of in-group identity formation and verification (the tendency for individuals with shared self-conceptions to converge in their identity-based meanings and modes of expression), but also the effect of oppositional identity claims contributing to the increasing separation between groups which hold conflictive meanings and identity

(see, for example, Hogg and Terry, 2000). This identity-based dynamic may have important implications for community planners and others interested in the well-being of rural communities. The (re)construction of social capital within these landscapes depends heavily upon a degree of shared trust and mutual regard, a feature which has been predicted to be under significant revision within multifunctional landscapes (Marsden, 1999; Seyfang, 2006). The locus of oppositional identity—whether within the community, or between the community and non-local actors—is likely to play an important role in the negotiation of "new forms of economic relationships of production, exchange, and trust" (Marsden, 1999) emergent within transitional landscapes.

Agency and Mobility in Late Modernity- Farming in the Consumptive Rural?

While I have intentionally focused on the dynamics of landscape change, farmer identity and the emergence of a 'new localism' within particular social and biophysical spaces, it must be remembered that these spaces themselves are constructed within the dynamic interaction between and across regional, national, and international spaces. While the sets of convictions and identities associated with the 'new localism' accurately characterize the self-held meanings of many neo-agrarians in the study, the vast majority have originated non-locally or from outside the local agricultural *milieu*.

The in-migration of non-local and, often, non-rural residents to landscapes transitioning from productivism to multifunctionalism is a commonly-described pattern (Lowe *et al.* 1993; Smailes, 2002; Halfacree, 2006; Wilson, 2008). Marsden's (1999) described this movement as exemplary of the emergence of a new 'rural future' in which the release of agricultural lands and the increasing public demand for the goods and services of rural landscapes would threaten to transform these areas into consumptive (rather than productive) landscapes. This view of non-rural in-migration continues to

predominate within the literature and assumes that in-migrants in these landscapes are primarily consumers, rather than producers of these goods and services. Wilson's (2008) work on models of transitional pathways from productivism to multifunctionalism, which emphasizes the role of history in shaping the trajectory and 'transitional capacity' of individual farms, assumes *farmer* transition (and thus a continuous tie between the individual farmer and the *space* of the farm itself), though acknowledging that rapid transformation from productivism to multifunctionality may occur in cases where a "wealthy urbanite" purchases a farm and maintains it as a hobby farm. He doubts, however, the importance of this dynamic in understanding agrarian change because the hobby farmer 'does not depend on the farm for income', and has too little time to invest in productivist agricultural behaviors. The literature has, thus, effectively classed new agriculturists from non-agricultural backgrounds as "hobby farmers" and therefore *non*-farmers in the discussion on (post)agricultural landscape transitions.

This understanding of the meanings, convictions and behaviors (in short, the identity) of new in-migrants to these agricultural landscapes may be inappropriately narrow and hinder our understanding of how changes are occurring within the social and biophysical spaces of agricultural landscapes. A particularly important point of convergence between traditional and neo-agrarian farmers involved the issue of farm solvency. Despite significant differences between farmers in terms of the source of economic subsidy (whether through loans, savings, family connections or grants) neo-agrarians, no less than traditional dairy farmers, were insistent that farm operations had to be "self-sustaining" or sufficient "to make a living." Across the study, there was broad consensus that the 'hobby farmer' or 'gentleman farmer' was no farmer at all.

Despite these differences, the relative mobility of most neo-agrarians within the study (in terms of both spatial mobility, and the ability move into and out of farmer occupations) contrasts markedly with the sense of constraint and immobility expressed by many traditional farmers, particularly those tied to

struggling operations. There has been a significant amount of work in recent years on a similar phenomenon, that of the so-called 'amenity migration' (McIntyre, 2006), which provides several helpful reference points for exploring farmer in-migrants within these landscapes. Greater personal mobility and the role which individual agency plays in the determination of locality and residence are increasingly understood to be a characteristic feature of late modernity (Marsden, 1999). The advances of technology, production efficiency and specialization, role individuation and the breakdown of many historical social structures has brought about a heightened sense of existential 'placelessness' (Giddens, 1991; Stedman, 2006; McIntyre *et al.* 2006). Within this context, there has been a growing phenomenon of second- and seasonal-home ownership throughout the US and beyond. While the causes and consequences of this phenomenon are myriad, there is an important sense in which this movement is an expression of this existential unease in the 'reflexive project of the self' (Giddens, 1991). The increased separation between 'work' and 'home' environments in the modern period has allowed for individuals to increasingly search for landscapes and regions which are more expressive of their self-identity than their places of work. Stedman's (2006) work on this is illustrative, observing that many second-home owners in the north woods of Wisconsin expressed deeper attachment to these places because their primary homes were sited in areas for economic reasons and did not allow for the expression of what that felt were their core values and deeper identity.

While the separation between 'work' and 'home' environments has allowed for the amenity migration, the particular movements which are characteristic of many neo-agrarians in the study are distinct in a potentially important way. Rather than seeking to further the space between work and home, neo-agrarians in the study expressed the desire to *bring together* home and work as a primary motivation for going into agriculture, particularly in terms of the beneficial impact they believed it would have on children and family life. Indeed, the benefits of 'working together as a family' figured prominently in discussions surrounding motivations for entering—and remaining in—agriculture not only for neo-

agrarians but also for many traditional farmers. As we have noted before, the movement into these areas and the adoption of new agrarian identities was conceived of not in consumptive terms, but rather in productive ones. While many participants articulated a desire to find a 'pause in a world of movement' (McIntyre *et al.* 2006) it was not a recreational pause, but rather a pause from a world which failed to support their self-held meanings and core values, in order to get back in touch with the earth, family, community, etc. through agricultural labor.

Sense-of-place theorists have discussed the role which the particularistic character of a landscape may play in the dynamics of place attachment (Stedman 2003, 2006). For neo-agrarians in the study, it was these particular landscapes—along both their biophysical and social dimensions—which provided settings allowing for the expression of their core-values in ways that they felt their prior settings could not. While Marsden (1999) doubts the ability of 'wealthy urbanites' to connect to local spaces, there is an important counter-argument which observes that the mere fact of *choosing* these localities, rather than inheriting them, may be particularly binding (Stedman, 2006). While the ties by which traditional family farmers are linked to particular farm spaces has been suggested as an important mediating factor between structural agroeconomic models and actually rates of farm abandonment (Lobao and Meyer, 2001), the nature of these ties may vary considerably, causing us to differentiate between place-attachment and love-of-place. This distinction is reflected in the nature of the farm-tie expressed by some traditional farmers for whom the tie to farm was expressed both as an enablement (lending legitimacy to their own threatened place-claims and associated personal identity) and a constraint (where obligation to family lands prohibited movement to more favorable landscapes or occupations).

While I have noted several potential social implications for the elaboration and performance of farmer identity types within these transitional landscapes, it must always be remembered that the performance of identities through normative behaviors provides a vital link between social and ecological (or

biophysical) elements of the landscape. Let me suggest a number of potential ecological implications of the performance of farmer identity may be equally numerous. The relatively greater diversity of crops and habitats under neo-agrarian management regimes, especially where bundled with other neo-agrarian commitments such as non-chemical pest management, mulching for weed-suppression, and the conservation of non-productive habitats, is likely to have further positive impacts on local—and potentially regional—biodiversity and the delivery of ecosystem services (Matson *et al.* 1997; Altieri, 1999; Schmitzberger *et al* 2005; Bengtsson *et al,* 2005).

The maintenance of agriculture on the New York landscape is of significance not only for the identity of many rural New Yorkers and the well-being of local communities (Fitchen, 1991; Irwin *et al,* 1999) but also for the conservation of ecosystem services, including landscape-level biodiversity. If the emergence of neo-agrarian identities, with their increasing connectivity to local population centers and the preferential market prices realized through direct-sales, is able to reinvigorate New York's agricultural sector (particularly in terms of farm household well-being), this may have direct positive impact on the persistence of farming on the landscape, with a number of important ecological outcomes. The historic pattern of mixed landscapes and the abundance of early-successional habitats maintained by a predominance of agricultural land uses have conserved a high degree of habitat heterogeneity which has fostered wild biodiversity (NYSDEC, 2006). The abandonment of agricultural land across the state and the concomitant maturation of even-aged forest stands has raised significant concerns regarding biodiversity loss for a variety of species including birds (Rosenberger and Burger, 2008), mammals (Litvaitis, 1993) and plants (Latham, 2003). New ways of being farmer which allow for the persistence of agriculture on the landscape (by recreating local networks that are increasingly tied to communities which are able, and willing to pay preferentially for local foods) may have positive ecological outcomes across the New York landscape and shape the trajectory of change away from a post-agricultural one to a sustainable, multifunctional landscape.

Conclusion

The sets of self-held meanings, commitments and self-perception of farmers within these transitional agricultural landscapes are diverse, and undergoing a period of change and revision. My work suggests that these elements of the landscape may serve as influential forces in the elaboration of farmer identities, variously enabling and constraining the emergence of particular identity types, not only by shaping the perspectives of local residents (and their evaluation of normative, or 'in-place,' identity categories) but also by their ability to support a particular range of important human meanings (Stedman, 2003, 2006). The suite of self-held commitments that comprise the farmer identities which are emergent from meaningful interaction both with social structure and the universe of inter-personal relationships on the one hand, and with the forms, features, constraints and enablements of the biophysical world on the other, are expressed through particular behaviors which act back upon the social and biophysical landscape, with real implications for social and ecological systems. Seen in this way, the farmer identity-landscape relationship may be characterized as a mutually elaborative process which involves not only the social components (which commonly form the crux of contemporary identity theory) but also the biophysical components of the real 'world that is there' in a dialectical process of formation, reproduction and change. Because the social and physical landscapes vary in their ability to support farmers' different self-held meanings and identity, transitions along a trajectory of landscape change may act to shape the range of these identities. Landscape transitions within New York have challenged historical conceptions of what it means to be a farmer due to the broad-based collapse of traditional family dairy farming and the removal of these and other important referents of traditional rural identity, concomitant with a substantial increase in "natural' land covers less dominated by agricultural production. These same transitions have, in a sense, fostered the emergence of novel farmer self-identities in which the meanings of elements in the social and biophysical landscape have

been redefined. While the heterogeneity of these landscapes—their small farm parcel sizes and pervasive forest cover—presents both symbolic and practical obstacles to the verification of productivist farmer identities, neo-agrarian farmers have embraced these elements as a critical component of their identity as “small farmers” in a changing landscape.

Agricultural landscape change—in terms of both cause and consequence—remains a critical issue at the heart of modernity’s challenge both to human identity meanings and the provision of rural goods and services within a dynamic and increasingly inter-connected world. Our ability to understand not only the structural drivers of change within these landscapes, but also the relationship between these structures and the individual agency of the human subject, depends upon a critical exploration of processes of identity formation at the farm-level. While this work contributes to the discussion on agent-based factors in agricultural change within transitional landscapes, much work remains to be done. My work here has focused primarily on the qualitative characterization of farmer identity processes within these transitional landscapes. These findings could be further refined, or refuted, through quantitative comparisons between farmer identity types, relative presence on the landscape and factors of variance in order to allow for greater generalizability of my findings. Finally, while my findings suggest that emergent farmer identities may arise primarily through in-migration and replacement—rather than through the transition of traditional farmers away from productivist commitments—there are important exceptions which need to be further studied in order to understand possible transformational pathways for existing farmer identities.

Addendum: *Critiques and Caveats*

Some additional discussion should here be included relating to my own reflections on the limitations of my research in terms of its methods, findings and analyses, as well as the hypotheses and conclusions I have drawn from my empirical data.

Key-Informant Bias

Because this study, like most qualitative studies, has focused on local-level processes and a few specific cases, rather than seeking to represent a broader population as might be attempted through quantitative approaches, there remains the possibility that those (relatively) few farmers who participated in this study may have introduced some degree of "key informant bias" (Pelto and Pelto, 1975). I have sought to minimize the risks of this particular validity threat through the strategies mentioned previously (intentionally seeking 'maximally-variant' participants, using multiple entry-points into the study sites, etc). There may yet remains, however, some degree of risk. Those farmers I have labeled neo-agrarians were, in general, more easily accessible, quicker to understand the purposes and intentions of the study, and somewhat more articulate in terms of their self-understanding within the interview format. This was certainly not always the case, but the tendency ran this way.

Neo-agrarians as Non-Local

I have offered evidence to support my observation that the vast majority of neo-agrarians who participated in this study were non-local to their context and, further, that the majority of these were from urban or suburban backgrounds. There are some exceptions to this which I think may be important for further research (Otsego-1 and Otsego-3, for instance). This study's results clearly suggest that, at least amongst the participants in this study, the pattern is that of multifunctional in-migration rather than the multi-functional transition of existing farms, as (apparently) assumed in the multifunctional

transitional pathways literature (Wilson, 2008). In our study, there are some farmers (and, by consequence, some farms) which have made this transition and, in so doing, have improved the well-being of their farming operation, whose experiences are worth exploring further. My own experience here suggests that older farming operations which transition to multifunctionality may be longer-lasting in these landscapes (a hypothesis which also ought to be interrogated).

Comparisons and Causality

Some commentary should here be provided regarding the explicit and implicit comparisons and causal statements that were made in the research paper. While I have sought previously to articulate the stance which qualitative research has tended to take on the matter of the analysis of variance (something more suited to quantitative studies than to qualitative ones), the case may be made for some degree of local comparison (Maxwell, 2005).

I avoided specifically making county-level comparisons between participants because the participants were not selected according to the sampling criteria which quantitative research employs in order to make generalizations regarding the representativeness of particular samples. Comparative language was used, however, especially between "traditional farmers" and "neo-agrarians." It was necessary to make these comparisons for two reasons: First, these were *emic* comparisons, drawn by the participants themselves and presented in my research where they were supported with specific statements made by the participants. Second, these comparisons between different respondents were important in order to identify particular features of farmer identity, without which description would not be possible (for example, "small farmer"—a term regularly used by farmers during the interviews—implies a comparison to "large farmer"). These comparative distinctions were the basis for a discussion about the possible emergence and influence of oppositional group identity processes being operative both within these sites and between these sites and other parts of the country.

As we have mentioned, the data which was used to formulate our conclusions included not only the in-depth interviews themselves, but also analysis of some aspects of the context such as the farm itself (through my direct observation and field notes) and through the collection and analysis of other data such as county-level changes in agricultural land versus forest cover and non-agricultural uses, average farm size, etc. While this additional data was not collected for the purpose of identifying variables or analyzing their variance against particular features of farmer identity (not a task suited to qualitative research) there were times when they served this function—most often in cases where farmers themselves made specific statements about how they perceived that the biophysical and social character of their surroundings played a role in farming decisions. Some of these inferences, presented both explicitly and implicitly in my research paper, were made relating to biophysical features of the landscape and some features of farmer identities (implicitly comparative across counties and causal in their suggestion), which raised questions during the review process. I have here an opportunity to probe this a little deeper and engage with two possible threats to the validity of the assertions I have maintained. First, I asserted that "small farming" was considered to be more "in place" (versus "out-of-place") than large-scale farming, based upon the specific claims of participant farmers. I supported this by observing the small—and decreasing—average farm size in each of the counties. While I still stand behind this assertion, there is a potential (though non-deleterious) weakness. Like many identity attributes, "small farmer" is something of a fuzzy distinction. Participants seldom defined this precisely, though it tended to refer to the farm being operated by the family, and the amount of production, or the number of cows (as was specifically and consistently identified by dairy farmers). The USDA category of "small farm" is an entirely economic category, and refers only to gross sales (I defined this specifically when using the data from the Census of Agriculture). There is some variation between these definitions, which nuances the application of USDA data in support of farmer claims. Secondly, USDA data is only

available at the county-level and there is something of a scalar mismatch when using aggregate county statistics for supporting the claims of individual farmers in the landscape.

I feel, however, that we are on reasonable footing for two reasons: First, I have sought to include only direct causal statements linking the landscape character to farmer identity where they were supported by direct quotes from farmers (seeking to limit the degree of my own inference). Second, the inferences made from my analysis of aggregate statistics of average farm size, and land-use and land cover are relevant and within the remit of qualitative research.

How New is Neo-Agrarianism?

I have used the term "traditional" in the way in which it has been used by participants in the study, to refer to conventional, productivist farming operations. This elision needs to be explored further. Productivism, we are reminded (McCarthy, 2005), was a feature of a particular time in agricultural history characterized by government subsidy for large-scale farms, a primary (or, perhaps, exclusive) focus on productive efficiency, etc. As such, it has not always been the norm and therefore cannot properly said to be 'traditional' if we take a longer historical view of these landscapes. Conversely, many neo-agrarians, while referring to conventional dairy operations as 'old-world' or 'traditional' at the same time will commonly characterize their own farming operations as 'getting back to our roots' as a civilization, or re-establishing some broken connection between humanity and the earth which was supposed to exist at some historical point. To refer again to the cases above where conventional farmers had made the decision to switch to organic agriculture, both farmers indicated that their decision to switch merely reflected convictions which they had already had, that neither had felt comfortable using chemicals in their farming, or having large operations, etc, suggesting that there was nothing new about their neo-agrarianism.

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APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Farmer Identity and the Changing Landscape: ***Interview Guide***
Researcher: Micah Ingalls, Department of Natural Resources at Cornell University
Interviewee:
Location:

1. **Tell me about your farm (operation)**

   (Prompts: How many acres? Land under cultivation- any land leased? When was the farm acquired? What kind of farm is it? Who works it? Any hired help? Day to day operations? What products and where are they sold? Total annual sales? Does the farm carry debt?)

2. **How has your farm changed historically?**
3. **How do you feel your own experiences with these changes relates to broader changes in agriculture?**

   (Prompts: the experience of other farmers in the area, in the region?)

4. **Tell me about your local area.**

   (Prompts: Is this a rural area? An agricultural area?)

5. **Could you tell me a little about your community, and your relationships in the community?**

   (Prompts: What is the community like? Your relationships with others in the community- farmers and non-farmers, how have these two changed over time?)

6. **Could you speak a little about the role that the farm, and farming in general plays in your life and that of your family?**
7. **What do you see as the role of the farmer in your area/society more generally?**
8. **What sorts of things do you look for to assess a good farm/farmer?**

   (Prompts: What are the characteristics of a good farming operation? What parts of your operation would you improve if you could?)

9. **In terms of your ideals, or vision, for yourself and your farm, do you feel like you are able to live out these ideals?**

   (Prompts: 'to do the sort of farming you want to', or 'have the sort of farm you want to have', why/why not?)

10. **Earlier, we spoke about changes in agriculture which have occurred in this area: what do you think of these changes from the historical character of farming?**

    (Prompts if not mentioned above: 'new' forms of farming- organic, hobby… Llamas?)

11. **What do you think the future holds, for your farm, community? Farming in general?**
12. **What strategies might you consider to stay in farming, and which ones would you not consider?**

    (Prompts: transition to other forms of agriculture, gas-leasing, more off-farm income)

13. **If your farm needed to close down someday, what would that mean for you and your family, your future in the area?**
14. **What if the character of this area really changed completely, away from farming: would stay in agriculture, or in the area?**